

“Seeking Good Luck” in North Korea

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Abstract: *Sinjŏm or spirit fortune-telling is now an intimate part of everyday life among many North Koreans. Extremely popular at the grassroots level, the rise of this traditional religious culture since the late 1990s, if properly understood, can provide an interesting looking glass into North Korea’s society and politics in transition. This report is one small step to that end.*

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North Korea today is not the same place as the North Korea of the late twentieth century. The formal structure of its state system remains largely unchanged—notably, the centrality of the paramount leadership.¹ This is irrespective of the fact that some shift has taken place since the current third-generation leadership took power in 2011, especially in the balance of power between the party and the army. Great changes are observed rather in relations between state and society. Most obvious is the general collapse of the social economic order, especially that of the state-distribution system of food and other basic subsistence goods commonly referred to as the *baegŭp* system. Today Korean society north of the 38th Parallel is no longer dependent on the state for its physical survival. The state has long stopped being the paternalistic caretaker of its citizens’ material survival and wellbeing, although in the

rhetorical sphere, it has never been anything short of an all-encompassing political *pater familias* throughout its seventy years of existence. Prominent observers explain the situation in terms of a precarious marketization of socio-economic lives.² The marketization in this context is a somewhat unique process, distinct from what is familiar to us in Asia’s other existing socialist nations. The process in North Korea began primarily as a bottom-up reaction to the economic-systemic meltdown in the second half of the 1990s, following the disintegration of the international socialist politico-economic order early in that decade. It is distinct from the initially top-down, state-driven economic reform as in China or Vietnam. A number of observers have examined North Korea’s transition from the state-commanded political economy to the so-called era of non-*baegŭp* (*bi-baegŭp sidae*). Some deal with the painful reality of extreme economic hardship of the late 1990s, whereas many others concentrate on the subsequent marketization of the social economy and related contest of power between the state and the market. The then widely circulated popular adage, “The market-place is our new Party!”, speaks of the spirit of the time. Most of these observers also take note of some simultaneous social changes, such as in gender relations, as women have been by far the most active participants in North Korea’s new informal economy. Generational relations also appear to be an important parameter. It is argued that people who were born and raised in the era of non-*baegŭp* have different attitudes to the state’s authority and its relevance to their lives, from those held by earlier generations. Owing

nothing to the state, as it were, they do not feel obliged to show loyalty to the political *pater familias* (i.e., an extension of the logic of political filial piety that has been central to North Korea's state ideology since the 1970s).

One notable outcome of the precarious marketization of North Korean socioeconomic life, however, has not received the attention that it deserves. This is the return of a genre of traditional popular religion—in particular, the explosive growth of fortune-telling (*sinjŏm*) and related cultural practices in citizens' everyday lives since the late 1990s and especially since the early 2000s. Nominally an outlawed practice and punished (sometimes severely) if discovered, fortune-telling is, nevertheless, a familiar aspect of everyday life decision-making and life-cycle rituals in today's North Korea. Information on this phenomenon is limited as religion and religious culture continue to be a strictly guarded and sanctioned subject; hence, this report is nothing more than a preliminary inquiry into North Korea's popular religiosity based on scattered and fragmentary evidence.



Rice-grain divination, popular in North Korea

Long-distance traders consult local fortune-

tellers before deciding on the date and direction of their journeys, often employing other modest improvised ritualistic gestures such as throwing a handful of salt behind one's back in the hope of avoiding bad luck. Some carry a pouch containing a handful of dried black beans for the same purpose. People who plan to visit relatives in northeast China seek help from fortune-tellers—to determine the most auspicious date and to conduct small rituals in the hope of augmenting the chance for a successful visit, which usually involves some form of business activity or short-term overseas employment.

One middle-aged woman went to see a fortune-teller in her town along North Korea's border with China shortly after her husband passed away and while her family was facing severe economic hardship. She was told that should she move to a land in the south, new economic prosperity and personal security would be found. She eventually decided to try a new life in South Korea, after consulting again with the fortune-teller about her two children, who would actually benefit, she was told, from their mother's being away in the southern land. A number of these local fortune-telling actors themselves took the difficult decision to move to South Korea, hoping to practice their trade openly and without fearing punishment. In deciding to do so, some were driven by the advice of their guardian or tutelary spirits. According to an informant now settled in a northern suburb of Seoul, her helper-spirits wished "to play in the open space"—that is, to exhibit their power and efficacy, rather than in secretive divination sessions, within the public space of a *kut*, shamanic ritual performance, which is not available north of the 38th Parallel. One challenge these actors face in their new home is how to acquire the traditional knowledge and techniques of the *kut*—a tradition that was discontinued in their northern home since the 1950s. Earlier I mentioned generational differences across the threshold of the radical economic crisis of the

late 1990s, as well as the gendered aspect of subsequent socio-economic changes at the grassroots level. It is interesting to note that a great many active fortune-tellers today are people who were born during the time of the Arduous March in the years 1994-98.

Testimonial evidence from these migrant actors suggests that engagement with fortune-telling is closely intertwined with questions of mobility at the grassroots level. Moreover, the practice is far from restricted to the lower or peripheral ranks of the social hierarchy. Party elites and their families also take part in such cultural-religious practices as a way of countering the uncertainties that are now deeply embedded in their status security prospects. It is known that in Pyongyang, where these elites and their families are concentrated, there are several fortune-tellers of considerable reputation who provide service exclusively to these privileged people.

These fortune-telling practices are also grounded in a broader milieu of shared moral sentiments. A good example would be an incident that took place in the early 2000s at a community close to North Korea's border with China. A local man was on his way to visit his parents' grave, carrying a bottle of rice wine and some cooked meat that he had prepared, with difficulty, as an offering to his deceased parents. He encountered two army sentinels on the way, who forced him to hand over to them his food and drink. The man was sorry to pay a tomb visit without any food offerings and cried when complying with their order. Shortly afterwards, the two soldiers began experiencing swollen lips and distorted facial muscles. The story ends with the two soldiers recovering their health after making a gesture of apology at the man's parents' graves. This act of reparation was overseen by a local fortune-teller after being approached by the family of one of the soldiers.

Evidence suggests that similar episodes

involving spirits' power existed in parts of North Korea throughout the post-Korean War era, at least since the 1970s when the earlier campaign against anti-revolutionary or feudal cultural elements became relatively moderated or was considered to have been completed. Carefully sheltered within circles of trusted relatives and friends, these episodes typically involve an intervention by a local actor who practices some improvised forms of spirit possession and communication. The current revival in fortune-telling should probably be seen in light of such pre-existing informal spirit practices. Although much remains to be known about the revival of these traditional practices before making an analytical judgement as to their place in today's North Korea, it is safe to suggest that the return of this traditional cultural form relates closely to the retreat of the state as the guarantor of social security and the related empowerment of non-state institutions such as the family in the protection and production of human security. We can even argue that the magical practice of fortune-telling fills the vacuum left by the demise of the previously encompassing, rhetorically magic-performing state.³ That is, this can be understood in terms of the breakdown of the state as a guarantor of basic subsistence and as part of society's desperate search for an alternative way to imagine and generate human security. Fortune-telling practices may appear to be fairly individuated acts. Those who seek such assistance must bring to the consultation an individual's authentic information (e.g., year and date of birth in the lunar calendar) as well as her or his specific wishes. In actuality, however, such practices are rarely individual matters but rather involve the integrity of an intimate relational milieu such as the family. People consult about their specific futures not necessarily exclusively for their own sake but often in view of their shared collective futures. Considering this, we can conclude that the rise of fortune-telling in North Korea entails a significant shift in the balance of power between the family and the state in terms of

their agency in future-making.



Spirit portrait of General Im Kyung-öp, a prominent helper-spirit in the Hwanghae shamanism tradition

It is said that nowadays “you can find a fortune telling house every two kilometers” in North Korea.⁴ According to another report: “One can find a fortune-teller’s house every ten *li* (roughly 4 kilometers). Once someone is rumoured to be efficacious, people start paying secret visits. Fortune-tellers in the North cannot put up a signboard, unlike those in the South. Not only they but also their clients could face imprisonment if caught by state security agents or their informants. But people still keep coming, defying the danger.”⁵ Seventy years after the Korean War and the onset of a militant revolutionary struggle against religion and “superstition” in North Korea, it appears

that religion is finding its way back. Some Christian groups in South Korea and the United States might like to see this return of religion as indicative of the power of the Kingdom of God and this alone—the evangelization of North Korea having been a vital agenda in the advent of Korean Protestantism after the Korean War and continues to be so to the present day. Concerns about conditions in North Korea where “the denial of religious freedom is absolute [and] the state enforces the absolute denial of religion through the active mobilization of the organs of the government” also continue to be voiced.⁶

The “denial of religious freedom” is true; however, it is also true that in the grassroots reality of today’s North Korea, there are developments that are oblivious to this long-held political truism. Religion is back in the north of the Korean peninsula, and what is returning is, for now, not yet the message of the Gospel but a host of so-called *gibok sinang* (meaning literally, “seeking good luck” religions)—the very old tradition of Korea’s spiritual life that had long been relegated to superstition or even idolatry. One can add that in this religious cultural sphere, a certain commonality is found between today’s North Korean society and its southern counterpart where fortune-telling remains a familiar part of life-cycle rituals. In both societies, moreover, albeit in distinct ways, the ideology of a disenchanted and secularized modern society coexists with the proliferation of magical or even superstitious customs (that is, it is a product of disenchantment). In this context, modernity involves a non-alignment between the ideology of secularization and a forceful continuity and reinvention of magical practices—a condition that is found elsewhere in East Asia.⁷



Hwanghae kut, by Kim Kŭm-hwa

North Korean politics and society, however, compared to the much-discussed retreat of the state from the economic sphere and related commodification and monetization of socioeconomic life. Evidence for this phenomenon remains limited and scattered. Despite these limitations, the returning “seeking good luck” practices merit attention, as they may suggest that irrevocable and powerful changes are indeed taking place in North Korea at the grassroots level. This change is both practical and moral in implication, and, if properly understood, can suggest changes in the balance of power between state and society.

The return of the art of “seeking good luck” is a notable phenomenon in North Korea. It occupies a marginal place in the analysis of

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Notes

¹ See Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, “North Korea's Partisan Family State,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 10, Issue 28, No. 1, July 9, 2012.

² Byung-Yeon Kim, *Unveiling North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Hazel Smith, *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³ On the idea of the modern state as a magic-performer, see Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

⁴ See *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in North Korea*, report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2005), pp. 4, 39.

⁵ Eun-young Lee, “Ttalbuk yöksul’ini dülyöjunün bukhanüi jömbogi siltae (The reality of fortune-telling in North Korea told by a defector fortune-teller),” *Sindonga*, 8 March 2007.

⁶ Cited from *Organized Persecution: Documenting Violations of Religious Freedom in North Korea*, special report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2021), p. 5.

⁷ Philip Taylor (ed.), *Modernity and Re-enchantment* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2007). One reviewer of this article raises objection to the way in which the phenomenon discussed here is described as a return of a traditional culture, asking whether it can be seen rather as a creation of a new folk religion, or even as a manifestation of postmodern culture. It goes without saying that any act of invention, including an invention of tradition, has both traditional-historical and visionary-aspirational aspects to it. In analytical terms, however, these two do not belong to the same register and I believe that it would make more sense to start with the restorative aspects, which then can invite critical approaches that highlight the relatively novel aspects. Besides, many of those whom I interviewed and who had practiced *sinjöm* in Pyongyang and elsewhere in North Korea explained their vocation in the terms of a return of a long-lost or suppressed tradition within their family and kinship milieus.