Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics , and: *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom* (review)

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Policymakers will find its concluding chapter especially helpful in formulating new strategies for engaging the DPRK. Ultimately, scholars who are committed to analyzing and writing about North Korea will discover in it a wealth of data that can be productively utilized in their own attempts to refine interpretive frameworks and theoretical statements. Although some of the arguments in *Witness to Transformation* will inevitably be challenged as the sub-field of North Korea Studies continues to develop and additional sources from this still largely isolated country become available, Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard should be commended for having produced a fine study that will likely serve as an important resource for years to come.

NOTE

1. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Reform from Below: Institutional and Behavioral Change in North Korea," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 73, no. 2 (2010): 133–52; Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Political Attitudes under Repression: Evidence from North Korean Refugees," *East-West Center Working Papers: Politics, Governance, and Security Series*, no. 21 (March 2010): 1–43.

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Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics by Patrick McEachern. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 320 pp. 6 halftones. 3 tables. $35.00 (cloth)

The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom by Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. 296 pp. $39.95 (cloth and e-book)

Is North Korea a totalitarian state? The two books under review offer contrasting answers to this question. According to Patrick McEachern, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is a dictatorship but not a totalitarian state. *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics* portrays Kim Jong Il as situated at the top of a pyramid of power composed of the Korean Workers' Party, Korean People's Army, and the DPRK Cabinet. By identifying and analyzing the contrasting ways that these three institutions frame political issues in their newspapers—the *Nodong Sinmun*, *Chosŏn Inmin'gun*, and *Minju Chosŏn*, respectively[1]—McEachern tracks competition between them and attempts to tease out distinctive policy positions within the North Korean central government. He

concludes that while Kim Il Sung was a totalitarian leader, Kim Jong Il is operating in a post-totalitarian framework, playing a demanding game of divide-and-rule by keeping the aforementioned institutions in active competition over policy matters and ensuring that no one organ gains long-term supremacy over the others. Simply put, Kim Jong Il is trying to balance atop of an institutional structure that he himself has kept wobbly so that no one else can easily climb to the summit.

McEachern carefully follows the fortunes of the Party, Army, and Cabinet with respect to three areas of great importance to the North Korean elite: U.S.-DPRK relations, Inter-Korean relations, and the DPRK economy. He argues that none of the three institutions have managed to gain uninterrupted control over any of these areas for the duration of the second nuclear crisis (roughly, October 2002–the present), and no group has been given control over all three issues for longer than a few months at a time. This view of North Korean politics is more controversial than may appear at first glance. B. R. Myers, for example, has decried the notion of competition between hardliners and pragmatists in the North Korean foreign policy apparatus as deluded Western "mirror-imagining."[2] As long as we remain mindful of such warnings about wishful and parochial thinking, McEachern's approach seems to offer a promising alternative to all-too-common explanations about North Korea's volatile foreign policy shifts as a sign of irrationality or outright insanity.

Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh concede that policy disagreements certainly exist to some extent between individual North Korean leaders but reject the idea of significant policy competition between government organs (Hassig and Oh, p. 247). In their view, Kim Jong Il is a totalitarian leader, just as his father was before him. DPRK policy on the economy, inter-Korean relations, and the U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff were all developed under Kim Jong Il's supervision and implemented by generals and aides that "would not know how to run the country without [him]" (Hassig and Oh, p. 62).

Hassig and Oh depict North Korean politics as driven by corruption rather than policy competition. Kim Jong Il purportedly bribes or blackmails influential figures to maintain their loyalty and keeps those without power struggling to survive so that they lack the energy to protest his rule. According to Hassig and Oh, even as the mechanisms that drive the North Korean state are weakening because of a lack of resources to keep greasing the wheels, power remains firmly centered around Kim Jong Il.

Instead of attempting to choose between these two interpretive perspectives, it might be more useful here to point out how each might be modified or refined to better capture the complexity of North Korean politics. For example, McEachern's book does not address the interconnections between the competing institutions he identifies, especially with respect to the leading families in the DPRK. Many such families have several children, with each holding a powerful position in a different institution. They might be likened to the European nobility in the feudal era: the first son stayed in court, the second entered the church, the

third joined the military, and so forth. North Korean families similarly attempt to diversify their power bases within the state rather than align entirely behind one state organ such as the Army or Party. In other words, family networks may be one of multiple factors that would complicate McEachern's model of clear institutional distinctions in terms of policy positions and interests.

Hassig and Oh's model of totalitarian leadership needs to be refined to account for shifts and inconsistencies in government policy.[3] The authors describe the 2002 economic reforms as a bold decision by Kim Jong Il to change the North Korean economy to produce "cost-effective results" (Hassig and Oh, p. 70). In reality, the 2002 reforms effectively legitimized the economic measures that had been widely adopted in the wake of the floods and famines of the 1990s. Furthermore, even if one were to accept their conclusion that Kim Jong Il personally made this move to liberalize the DPRK economy, what about the (not entirely successful) attempts to restrict market activities soon after the 2002 reforms? Kim Jong Il, like other world leaders, may well swing from moments of decisive and transformative statesmanship to episodes of uncertainty and reaction. Yet, it cannot be assumed that Kim Jong Il makes decisions in a vacuum.

Ultimately, it might be best to combine the two perspectives to test examples of apparent totalitarian rule for signs of underlying institutional competition and vice versa. McEachern's methodology can be used to try to peer behind the curtain in those instances where Kim Jong Il appeared to intervene directly in policy disputes. McEachern notes that the Korean Workers' Party reluctantly changed its policy position after the first nuclear test in late 2006 to tow the line for pragmatic engagement with the United States (McEachern, p. 196). Can we detect the hand of Kim Jong Il in this shift—for instance, by way of his control over the powerful National Defense Commission? Alternatively, one might focus on the rare times when the Party, Army, and Cabinet all aligned on a specific issue and search for decisive actions by Kim Jong Il that forced concordance between groups.

Pairing the two books not only makes for an engaging intellectual exercise but also offers an excellent introduction to a variety of fascinating, if somewhat problematic, sources. McEachern draws his analysis from a host of different North Korean press organs, all of which are approved by the same central propaganda department. It is unclear if the differences between the featured institutions can be clearly read in the different news sources, or, with so much available material, if it is possible to find a statement to support just about any position. Hassig and Oh's book engages an even wider range of sources, from official documents and scholarly treaties to sensationalist memoirs by those who worked for Kim Jong Il, and, most notably, hundreds of defector/refugee testimonies. Hassig and Oh's reliance on the latter presents particular analytical challenges. Since Kim Jong Il is largely isolated from the North Korean populace, very few defectors would really have much knowledge of his role in setting and directing policy for the North Korean state. Furthermore, while

most North Koreans understand that their country is poor, many are very proud of what the DPRK has achieved—all the while holding off the most powerful country in the world for the past sixty years. Hassig and Oh's surveys find that almost as many defectors are as likely to see North Korea's problems as a result of American hostility as the failure of the DPRK government (Hassig and Oh, p. 183). The authors assert, however, widespread dissatisfaction with Kim Jong Il. It is not entirely clear how the data in their book proves endemic dissatisfaction with the North Korean government and its top leaders. These reservations notwithstanding, their sources definitely do allow Hassig and Oh to tell powerful stories about the hardships borne by the common people of North Korea as well as their hopes for the future.

Finally, one is left thinking of the implications of the "totalitarianism versus institutional competition" debate outlined above for the next generation of North Korean leadership. If Kim Il Sung was the model totalitarian leader, and Kim Jong Il is operating in a post-totalitarian framework, what can we expect from Kim Jong un? Will he have the clout to play key institutions off against one another or will a more collective leadership emerge? Alternatively, in line with Hassig and Oh's analysis, if the mechanism to rule as a totalitarian leader is still intact in North Korea, does this mean that a leadership transition may be much smoother than many anticipate?

NOTES

1. North Korea and South Korea employ slightly different orthography for Korean and the DPRK does not use the McCune-Reischauer system of Romanization. Thus 로동신문 (*Rodong Sinmun*) would be rendered 노동신문 (*Nodong Sinmun*) in the South. McCune Reischauer Romanization does not note these differences.

2. B. R. Myers, "The West's North Korean Delusion," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 2010.

3. Nor can it be assumed that Kim Jong Il micromanages decisions at every level, even given North Korea's relatively limited interaction with foreign states and unofficial groups. Indeed, Hassig's and Oh's perspective of totalitarian leadership does not effectively account for the internal competition that many Korea watchers, the author of this review included, have observed first hand in cooperative engagements with North Koreans. It is not unusual to see North Korean groups/factions actively working to undermine one another in development and trade projects with foreign partners. If Kim Jong Il sets policy in the North as Hassig and Oh argue, it seems unlikely that these groups would have the ability to challenge each other's initiatives in this way.

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