Policy Forum Article

State-Endorsed Popular Culture: A Case Study of the North Korean Girl Band Moranbong

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of Moranbong as a new popular cultural phenomenon in North Korea. I am interested to examine the patron–client relationship in North Korea by analysing the personal patronage extended by North Korean autocrat Kim Jong-un to the all-female pop band Moranbong. In return for propaganda performances to convey images of material well-being of the regime and extolling the virtues of the ultimate leader, the autocratic regime bestows social recognition, legitimacy and fame to Moranbong members as a reward. Through an analysis of patron–client relationship in the North Korean political system, I move on to examine the ideological contents of Moranbong and the propaganda value-add they bring to the North Korean political system. Here, interpretations of Moranbong’s symbolisms by both internal and external audiences are examined based on media reports and other writings that originated from both Korean and international sources.

Key words: Korea, popular culture, Moranbong

1. Introduction

This article examines the emergence of Moranbong as a new popular cultural phenomenon in North Korea. I am interested to examine the patron–client relationship in North Korea by analysing the personal patronage extended by North Korean autocrat Kim Jong-un to the all-female pop band Moranbong. In return for propaganda performances to convey images of material well-being of the regime and extolling the virtues of the ultimate leader, the autocratic regime bestows social recognition, legitimacy and fame to Moranbong members as a reward. Through an analysis of patron–client relationship in the North Korean political system, I move on to examine the ideological contents of Moranbong and the propaganda value-add they bring to the North Korean political system. Here, interpretations of Moranbong’s symbolisms by both internal and external audiences are examined based on media reports and other writings that originated from both Korean and international sources.

Park Young-ja’s article discusses the idea of ‘clientelism’, which refers to unequal distribution of power between individuals resulting in the patrons providing political support, protection, social dignity, public recognition and privileges to their clients who in turn provide the loyalty and services that the patron need (Park 2015a). Special privileges, public exposure and even personal relationships (e.g. as the girlfriend of Kim Jong-un) bestowed to the band are the informal interactions found in a formal unit of the propaganda arm of the North Korean state whose members are...
salari ed workers. Park’s idea of clientelism highlights the motivation behind North Korean public figures’ willingness to work with the state and ensure the survival of the regime.

In economics, the patron–client relationship is used under the situation of asymmetric information. The asymmetric relationship that exists between patron and client in the North Korean case is generally based on the interplay between wealth and power. The definition of ‘patron–client’ relationship has a technical meaning in the field of Korean Unification Studies. Young-Ja Park, a notable scholar in this field, focuses on the idea of ‘power–wealth symbiosis’ found in the North Korean command economy’s political clientelism, whereby those individuals with power and wealth at different levels of North Korean society provide a protective mechanism over weaker supporters in the informal network of ‘patron–client’ institution, something that occurs in the daily lives of North Koreans (Park 2015b).

Kim Jin-ha’s publication is another relevant article that points out a tendency for dictatorships to turn ‘personalist’ where power and political legitimacy is centred on the dictator, without whom the political system is unable to survive and state institutions cannot function while rival sources of power are defeated (Kim 2011). However, when followers of the dictator begin to attract and accumulate their own smaller pools of clients, the dictator may begin to develop suspicions of plotters against his/her supreme authority, and therefore, they can be eliminated as potential threats. These features apply to Moranbong as well, particularly in terms of their rivalries with groups like Chongbong. A solution that is less extreme than total elimination is to build up polycentric competing groups that depend on the dictator for decisive and final arbitration. In the case of popular culture, this includes rival pop bands to diminish any monopolistic or hegemonic domination by one group to the exclusion of others.

In terms of the mechanism through which power is exercised, Lee Kyo-Duk and his team’s publication described two main categories of North Korean state rule that include the ‘personal rule’ model, in which a single individual dominates the political structure and process of policy-making, and the ‘conflict model’, in which an entity becomes dominant through manipulating conflicts and tensions between elitist groups to their advantage within an autocratic society (Lee et al. 2013). Based on the interpretive readings of Moranbong’s activities and the fate of its members, both models are interrelated rather than mutually exclusive.

There are commonalities amongst the three readings. In many socialist systems, counterbalancing forces tend to take the form of reformist and conservative factions. The dictator can then situate himself/herself in between these two ideological groups to play one faction against another. All three readings in the preceding texts mentioned the essential function of rivalries to shore up one’s power in the form of ‘conflict model’, ‘clientelism’ or polycentric rivalries under a ‘personalist’ model. In order to have cohesive rival factions, all three models need to have patron–client structures with a factional head dispensing goodies to his/her respective followers in return for loyalty. The factional heads will then compete with each other to be in the dictator’s favour. To position the dictator in the centre of power within the political structure, all three readings mentioned the need to create a cult of personality around the leader, and this brings us to the second set of readings on the role of propaganda in North Korea. To maintain a ‘personalist’ model of dictatorship and operate a patron–client relationship, the North Korean regime needs to control the flow of information and direct it to their advantage.

2. Moranbong’s Origins and Role in North Korea

The service that Moranbong provides is performing propaganda songs that idolize their leader. According to the official North Korean news agency KCNA, the debut of this band was ‘prompted by a grandiose plan to bring about a dramatic turn in the field of literature and arts this year in which a new century of Juche Korea begins’ (Khazan 2013). Their hit

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songs in North Korea include ‘Let’s Study!’, ‘Our Dear Leader!’ and ‘Let’s Go Together!’ The titles of such songs such as ‘Our Dear Leader!’ are reflective of the ideological doctrines that North Koreans were asked to study, including ‘Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism’, named after their former leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il (BBC News 2015). Understanding the allure and power of popular culture, Kim is said to have assembled the group members of Moranbong personally in 2012, and therefore, it is not surprising that they support his cult of personality in the lyrics of their songs: ‘How can he be so kind...His smile is so warm and sweet. I have no choice but to be taken by him and his warm heart’ (Lah 2015). The idea of a warm and kind fatherly figure taking care of his charges arises from an autocracy’s tendency to appear benevolent to his people, particularly to lesser cultural elites like Moranbong who have their own fan following. But, benevolence has to be repaid with unwavering loyalty by Moranbong to their patron based on the concept of reciprocity. They are subjected to Kim Jong-un’s personal whims, including having their concerts cancelled by Kim in the eleventh hour when he worried about the privacy of his alleged former girlfriend Hyon Song-wol or reversing his own decision abruptly when he realized that the concert was held on the fourth anniversary of his father Kim Jong-il’s passing away on 17 December 2011 (Yi 2015).

Popular cultural icons who are praised and exalted by the state can easily lose their shine when they fall out of favour so they face potential insecurity in the unstable field of patronage. When Moranbong momentarily ‘disappeared’ from ‘live’ performances in the public view from July to September 2015, it sparked off fears about their fate and some wondered if they have overplayed their popularity. But they reappeared in September 2015 when they were re-endorsed by the North Korean leader again but without their band leader and violinist Sonu (Evans 2015a).

Prior to her disappearance, Sonu Hyang-hui was a star violinist, a model musician for the North Korean state and a model citizen. Therefore, her disappearance sparked off rife speculations in the international media. North Korean watcher Adam Cathcart attributed Sonu’s first disappearance between October 2013 and March 2014 to her rumoured ties with Kim Jong-un’s uncle Jang Song-taek when Jang and the band visited China in August 2012 (Cathcart 2014). Sonu was also noticeably missing from the 20 May 2014 concert to celebrate North Koreans who had achievements in the field of literature and the arts. If her Jang ties were true, Sonu might be an interesting case of insubordinate client, especially from the perspective of the pro-Kim Jong-un loyalists. Jang was eventually executed by Kim in a high-profile manner. Sonu’s second disappearance corresponded with the other band members but, like the band itself, she was reinstated in December 2015. Like the band itself, the reason for her reinstatement is not clear but probably parallels those mentioned in the succeeding texts for the band itself, having convinced the top leadership of their loyalties and value to the regime.

When Moranbong disappeared and its leader’s whereabouts were unknown, a new band known as Chongbong emerged and made its first appearance at Moscow. Kim’s wife, Ri Sol-ju, a former singer, was said to be instrumental in the establishment of the band (Do 2015a). The North Korea state media described the Chongbong as ‘ideological scouts, the bugles of revolution and ideological flag-bearers’ who are ‘creating music for the masses’ through ‘light music’ as a ‘revolutionary art organisation that represents and leads the era’ as part of a ‘grand plan’ of the ‘respected Kim Jong-un’ (Ryall 2015).

Moranbong and Chongbong do not publicly and directly engage in rivalries and animosities. One narrative claims that they are mutually exclusive because they are not contemporaries, but both are officially created and endorsed by Kim Jong-un. Radio Free Asia claimed that Chongbong is a replacement rather than a rival to Moranbong after the latter’s musicians settled down with their families or were exiled from North Korea (Yonhap 2015a). Other narratives suggest that it is not so much a rivalry between the two groups but tensions between their leaders and patrons. A
narrative in this school of thought suggests that the Moranbong–Chongbong rivalry is further complicated by the fact that Moranbong Director Hyun Song-wol was popularly known to be romantically involved with Kim Jong-un (Do 2015b), although there is direct no evidence to show that this affects the band’s relationship with Chongbong, which is backed up by Kim Jong-un’s wife Ri Sol-ju. There is some media speculation of this alleged animosity mentioned in The Telegraph, which reported ‘… palace intrigue last summer [2013] having incurred the displeasure of Ri Sol-ju, Mr Kim’s wife [and] The 31-year-old North Korean leader and the [Moranbong] performer [Hyon Song-Wol] were said to have been teenage lovers…’ (McElroy 2014), but there are no further details of the ‘palace intrigue’.

On 31 August 2015, during the months when Moranbong disappeared from public view, Chongbong performed Russian songs For Peace alongside the State Merited Chorus at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall to Russian elites, common Russian citizens and overseas North Koreans living in Russia; the official state propaganda magazine Democratic People’s Republic of Korea claimed that the performance ‘threw the whole audience into a state of great excitement…[as t]hey also perfectly represented Medley of Songs of Russian Girls in female chorus with fine and elegant vocal music and ensemble’ (Kim 2015a). Clearly, during this period and given the prominence of the Russian tour, Chongbong rose in ascendency during Moranbong’s absence until the latter was reinstated and tasked to perform to a visiting Cuban delegation (see succeeding texts). The reasons that led to Moranbong’s reinstatement are unknown.

There are some clues to understand Moranbong’s revival at the end of 2015 and avoid being replaced completely by Chongbong. The first clue is found in a New York Times report dated 11 December 2015, which indicated that Ri Sol-ju may actually be a patron of Moranbong (Wong & Guo 2015). If this information is true, it indicates a possible endorsement of the Moranbong by the individual most likely to be wary of its members, especially her husband’s former romantic interest. Another clue was the high-profile abrupt departure of Moranbong from Beijing on 12 December 2015 only 2 days after arriving on 10 December 2015 for a trip to boost relations between the two countries. The Moranbong band members acted faithfully on the commands given to them by the North Korean leadership. Such loyal actions can potentially earn credits for the band members from their leadership. They may have effectively communicated their top leadership’s displeasure at Beijing’s unhappiness with the North Korean missile tests. No official explanations for Moranbong’s departure were provided either by North Korea or China.

Indeed, by 11 May 2016, any possible public rift or rivalry between the two bands might have been scripted to disappear as both bands performed at the conclusion of the 7th Workers’ Party Congress, the first congress meeting in 36 years of its ruling Workers’ Party and, according to Reuters, Moranbong performed ‘alongside the Korean People’s Army State Merited Choir’, while Chongbong ‘features a jazzy instrumental and all-female chorus…’ (Reuters 2016). Another sign of normalization of Moranbong was visible when the band took a joint photo with Kim and his wife while they listened to Chongbong perform during the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Workers’ Party of Korea (EPA/Rodong Sinmun 2017). The North Korean sources that released these photographs appear to present a harmonious relationship between the two bands for the international audience.

In the post-7th Workers’ Party Congress celebrations, the preceding sequence of Moranbong singing with the army’s choir and then photographed alongside the top leader and his wife watching Chongbong’s later performance might suggest some prioritization of programme line-up with Moranbong in the lead, but there is no unambiguous evidence to support this. Despite this, one thing was visibly clear in 2016: Moranbong was back into the limelight after disappearing from public view for half a year. The ‘conflict model’ can be used to explain how Ri Sol-ju may have strategically positioned herself as the ultimate arbiter of the fates of cultural groups in North Korea if the
report of her patronage in both bands is true. She is therefore able to use one to check the other to keep both on their toes. The ‘conflict model’ can also be applicable to her husband who is now in the central position to balance the competing interests of Ri, Moranbong and Chongbong with the ultimate goal of regime preservation through their combined soft cultural power and influence on the masses.

In a conflict model of dictatorship, Moranbong has to watch out very carefully for their new rivals like Chongbong and constantly remind themselves to toe the official line or follow the fate of their leader. Information surfacing in 2013 indicated that Kim authorized the death of Hyon Song-wol (rumoured to be Kim Jong-un’s partner) of the group Unhasu Orchestra when Hyon and 11 other musicians allegedly appeared in pornographic videos sold in China (Ryall 2015). Other well-known North Korean personalities and their family members were made to witness the execution carried out by machine guns 3 days after Hyon and company were charged, and the eyewitnesses were then despatched to gulags due to guilt by association (Ryall 2015). The execution of Hyon Song-wol was proven wrong in spring 2014, when she reappeared in a Youtube video, and has been seen publicly also later as the director of Moranbong Band. While Hyon is considered safe for now, Moranbong members and their fates are closely studied by the South Korean and international media. Yonhap, South Korea’s official news agency, came up with alternative reasons for the band’s mysterious disappearance before resurfacing again, citing either ‘former’s members got married or some of them were deported from the country’ (Yonhap 2015b). This phenomenon indicates the precariousness of patron–client dependence, especially when the dictator in the personalist model changes the mind or if the conflict model necessitates the presence of rival groups that subsequently gains ascendancy.

3. Ideological Contents of Moranbong

Domestically, Moranbong was touted by North Korean propaganda as a representation of modernity with their trademark electronic sounds and fashionable clothes, displacing the traditional old-style Unhasu Orchestra in 2012 as the preferred choice for music-based state propaganda (Do 2015a). Almost unthinkably, the band even performed the music of Frank Sinatra’s ‘My Way’ during a concert in 2012 (Do 2015a). Unlike traditional propaganda that resembles state promulgations, young and attractive agents of the state who wear short skirts performing in an all-girls band may be attractive for young male fans, while the beautiful girl band members are inspirational for younger women who aspire to be like them. Therefore, state propaganda disseminated through popular cultural songs performed by attractive people may be more acceptable and palatable for the propaganda unit’s target audience than traditional propaganda slogans. The young and impressionable makes up an important segment of this target audience, and Moranbong’s performances resonate with this segment of North Korean society, particularly its fashionable and status-conscious younger elites. The appeal in Moranbong lies in the idea that the band ‘underscored the need to steadily develop traditional music in a balanced manner to suit the thoughts and feelings of Koreans and their aesthetic taste while meeting the need of the times and people’s desire’ (Foxnews.com 2013). In other words, Moranbong represented a new wave of cultural understanding that reflected generational changes amongst younger North Koreans.

Propaganda slogans designed for the military personnel utilize patriotism to encourage the establishment of a ‘monolithic command system more firmly throughout the army’ under Kim (BBC News 2015). Traditional North Korean propaganda therefore presents state objectives in a straightforward, unabridged and unadulterated manner like promulgations issued by a nanny state to its subjects. In this vein, traditional propaganda music tends to highlight monolithic homogeneity and uniformity in ideological thinking amongst the proletariat masses (peasants, industrial workers and the military). For example, North Korean workers are encouraged to
singing ‘We are the Happiest People in the World’ even in 2015 after communism had collapsed for more than 25 years (BBC News 2015). In contrast to traditional North Korean propaganda, the imagery of Moranbong as a progressive and reformist cultural conformist to the personal-ist dictatorship model studied by Kim Jin-ha where an autocrat may take up the mantle of reforms in order to shore up political legitimacy for his rule. In a clientelist system, having the progressive and liberal music of Moranbong counterbalance the conservative orientation of Unhasu performances allows Kim Jong-un to arbitrate between the two cultural–ideological factions and their fan followings. The net effect is centralizing Kim Jong-un’s position as the final judge in any cultural and ideological disputes between the two factions, a feature in authoritarian regimes.

3.1. Moranbong and International Relations

Moranbong’s propaganda value and symbolism extends to international relations as well. North Korean propaganda head Kim Ki-nam’s (The Chosunilbo 2015) original intention to dispatch the band to China in 2015 was to improve diplomatic ties. An Chan-il, the head of the World North Korea Research Center, argued that the move emulated Kim Jong-il who dispatched nationally well-known Pibada Opera Troupe to China in May 2010 to pave the way for a leadership summit in Beijing (Kim 2015b). But in that year, Moranbong’s performance in Beijing was cancelled. According to the Korean media, the cancellation of the Beijing concert was due to North Korean unhappiness over the Chinese media featuring Hyon Song-wol, who is reportedly a former girlfriend of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and this, according to South Korean watcher of developments in North Korea, Kim Yong-hyun, a professor of North Korean studies at Dongguk University in Seoul, said “the abrupt cancellation of the performances might have been due to stories about Hyon that undermine the “dignity” of the North Korean leader’ (Korea Herald 2015). Other Korean sources cited Beijing-based diplomatic sources that said Chinese swopping of a politburo member with a junior official after Kim detonated a self-identified hydrogen bomb may have insulted North Korean protocol and resulted in Moranbong’s cancelled performance (The Chosunilbo 2015). Some sources tried to downplay North Korea’s upper hand in this episode by suggesting that China probably was not comfortable with Moranbong’s propaganda overwhelmingly praising leader Kim Jong-un (Yonhap 2015c).

In another example of state-directed use of Moranbong, the band also demonizes North Korea’s international enemies in their performances. This is a good example of the ‘services’ that Moranbong provides for its patron, Kim Jong-un and his regime, based on the concept of ‘reciprocity’. CNN reported that in 2013 a live performance video portrayed a picture of a long-range missile flying over the Pacific Ocean and striking an imaginary representation of the United States while the concert fans cheered (Lah 2015). Such open displays of popular sentiments in the use of missiles and perhaps even nuclear capabilities are dangerous, given that the country has developed and tested such capabilities recently. Moranbong’s anti-imperialist propaganda reinforces the traditional enmity directed in state propaganda towards the United States. When the band’s performance was cancelled in 2010 and disappeared from public appearance in the second half of 2015, Moranbong’s international relations role diminished considerably. But the band resurfaced again in September 2015 and once again plays an important cultural diplomatic role in performing their music for a visiting official Cuban delegation led by Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez to mark the 55th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between the two states.

The state-produced propaganda magazine Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Juche 104 No 719 (2015) Issue 11 featured the band in full colour on page 3 of the publication. To understate the ‘militant and fraternal’ relationship between Cuba and North Korea, Moranbong was tasked with performing the music and songs of ‘Guantanamera’ and ‘Capri’ to ‘represent the thoughts and feelings of the Cuban people’ (Kim 2015b). After
September 2015, Moranbong was once again brought to the forefront of cultural diplomacy and projection of North Korean soft power. Performance for the Cuban delegation and the Moranbong full colour feature in a state propaganda magazine, followed by a high-profile internationally watched performance at a domestic event (post-7th Party Congress celebrations), signified the North Korean leadership’s re-endorsement of Moranbong’s cultural diplomatic role, value-adding to their external role as cultural ambassadors. Arguably, even their abrupt return to Pyongyang after the cancelled December 2015 Beijing performance was itself an aggressive show of diplomacy but in a more destructive negative manner. They were utilizing Track II cultural diplomacy to indicate elite leadership displeasure in bilateral relations with China. Both Cuban and Chinese episodes indicated Moranbong’s soft cultural contributions to regime preservation.

4. Concluding Remarks

Recapping the major points in this writing, clientelism allows North Korean individuals to obtain political support from their patrons to secure ‘political protection, privileges, and social dignity’ (Park 2015c). By singing the virtues of Kim Jong-un, Moranbong members are rewarded by the social recognition as iconic cultural figures in the country, Kim’s personal affection (even to the extent of cancelling their concerts with worries about their privacy!) and other privileges. We have at least one evidence of material benefits as well. Moranbong leader Hyon Song-wol was spotted in Beijing carrying an expensive Chanel bag (Yi 2015). Besides material luxury, Moranbong members also enjoy intangible privileges. Moranbong singer Ryu Jin-ah, who found fame, was rewarded with the coveted cultural title of ‘merited actor’, one of the most prestigious state recognition for artists and performers in North Korea (Do 2015a). Dispensing gifts by patron Kim to his client Moranbong and the girl band performing services in return for Kim is a symbiotic feature to keep each other in power. The service that the client Moranbong provides to its patron Kim Jong-un is constructing the cult of personality around Kim while encouraging mass adulation of their leader. If Moranbong sings praises of Kim and attracts others to do so by using their charms and attractiveness, Kim’s stature increases in the eyes of his followers, and this elevates Moranbong’s own status because they are seen as loyal favourites of their great leader.

Ideologically, perhaps realizing the value of the use of pop culture in creating resonance with the audience, Moranbong and its rival Chongbong represent a new generation of North Korea propaganda agents, more acceptable and attractive than the blunter propaganda artefacts and objects used in the past, such as portraits of supreme leaders, highly stylized posters, choirs made up of kids belting out propaganda songs and dusty village murals. Moranbong performs electronic sounds and sometimes even Western songs such as the ‘Theme from Rocky’ (Korea Times Editorial 2015), presenting a dichotomous alternative to the usual propaganda materials. Although the presentation is different, the general direction in adulation of the leadership and highlighting the central political position of the state remains the same.

When Kim Jong-un came into power, Kim, who received education in the West, was perceived as a possible reformer. His government even permitted a fashion show featuring Western-style fashion in Pyongyang also adorned by his wife. According to the report filed to the Daily Mail Online, 100 fashionistas attended a show in Pyongyang in September 2014 (Dean 2014). In the same article, the fashion designs on display in North Korea appeared to resemble 1960s-style Chanel suits (Dean 2014). In North Korean high-end fashion, ladies have been seen wearing short skirts above the knees (Fullerton 2015a), a brave departure from more Stalinist and Maoist pants that had been standard uniform issues in the ideological state. Some reports have attributed the change of fashion to a rising middle class that is more willing to consume and also experiment with new ideas about fashion. Another reason is inspiration derived from popular girl bands like Moranbong whose 18 members
spotted short skirts (a little above the knee-caps). Party aristocracy like Lee Sol-ju, wife of Leader Kim Jong-un, is also cited for starting a fashion revolution in the country. Moranbong is forgoing uniforms and revolutionary attires for Western-style clothes and fashion accessories. Hybridized Westernized clothing style that incorporates North Korea sensitivity and restraint is known as ‘conservative sexy’ (Evans 2015a). Besides the North Korean elites, another source of influence naturally comes from North Korea’s socialist neighbour, China (North Korea’s only ally), which has a decade-old market economy that offers items like high heel shoes that are popular amongst North Korean urbanites (Fullerton 2015b).

Why would Moranbong want to use Western songs in their performances? There are several possible reasons for this feature. First, the trends in North Korea in the preceding texts appear to hint at some form of initial opening up and reform mindedness. Second, Moranbong is always careful to tread a dual-tracked path, singing progressive-looking Western songs and tunes while unwaveringly dedicated to performing nationalistic and patriotic songs for Pyongyang, both overseas and domestically. In fact, an apparent reason for their abrupt departure and cancellation of the December 2015 Beijing concert was due to their (and their management’s) refusal to make edit lyrics in a song that seemed to touch on Chinese political sensitivities. In that song, according to veteran China watcher and Sinologist Bo Zhiyue, the lyrics included the lines: ‘Chairman Mao the greatest on the earth’ and ‘Great Leader Kim the greatest in the universe’ (Bo 2015); this was offensive to the Beijing ideologues, given the upending of the Great Helmsman by the current North Korean leader. In other words, Western and patriotic songs go hand in hand for Moranbong. In the early stages of Moranbong’s appearance, the band was praised for having a fashionable outlook by the Western media, opening up another avenue for a North Korean cultural group to have some form of acceptability and resonance with Western audiences and media. The BBC described Moranbong as ‘North Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s favourite guitar-slinging, miniskirt-sporting girl group. And these ladies know how to shimmy’, and the British Daily Telegraph noted that the band was ‘not what you’d expect from an unfashionably totalitarian regime where grey is the new grey…It could just about pass as a Eurovision entry from Azerbaijan’ (Evans 2015b). But any such possibility has evaporated with the current round of international tensions over the North Korean missile and nuclear tests.

But there was another side to Kim Jong-un’s rule that highlights the limitations of liberal trends in North Korea. In the attempt to consolidate power, he ruthlessly weeded out his uncle (often perceived as the leader of a pro-Beijing faction), many of his father’s former left-hand men who had the potential to challenge his rule and anyone who got in this way. He defied foes and ally alike to test missiles and nuclear devices, topping such tests with a hydrogen bomb test that angered even North Korea’s closest ally China, isolating the regime even further and minimized prospects of political and economic reforms. North Koreans’ only source of outside information are smuggled South Korean TV dramas and illegal mobile phones from China leak outside new and information into this secretive authoritarian state (Khazan 2013). In response to the availability of such materials in North Korea, punitive measures have increased in severity (Ryall 2015) for those caught with such materials. Therefore, even Moranbong is not safe in this unstable dichotomous political regime with contradictory ideological signals where conflicts co-exist with the institutionalization of a new order. In a conflict model, Chongbong may become a counter-reaction to Moranbong cultural liberalism if the personalist autocracy determines its cultural influence to be a threat. In the final analysis, personalist, clientelist and conflict models of authoritarianism will always ensure a counterbalancing conservative force in North Korea to mitigate the influence of its comparatively more liberal elements.

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