

Adam Cathcart, Robert Winstanley-Chesters and Christopher Green (eds.), *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics*. (Routledge Advances in Korean Studies). New York: Routledge, 2017. 150 pp., including references and index. ISBN: 978-1-138-68168-2 (HB)

The five years that have passed since the succession of Kim Jong Un as the Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have been marked by widespread debate and speculation over his foreign and security policy outlook. Whilst the young Kim's education in Switzerland gave rise to initial hopes that the new leader would chart a new and more enlightened foreign policy course for his country, such hopes have been dashed by North Korea's continued commitment to its missile and nuclear programmes. Questions remain: is Kim Jong Un driven by longstanding paranoia over fears of regime security, by outright hostility towards the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the US, or by some combination of both? Central to these questions is Kim Jong Un's adoption of the *Byungjin* ('Parallel Track') doctrine that calls for the parallel development of North Korea's nuclear programme alongside concurrent efforts at economic reform. And, more to the point for policymakers in the Northeast Asian region, how should they respond to the DPRK's pattern of aggressive behaviour?

Among the recent publications that have sought to shed some light on these questions is *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics*, a compilation of nine discrete chapters edited by Adam Cathcart, Robert Winstanley-Chesters and Christopher Green. The volume explores a range of issues pertaining to political developments since the succession of Kim Jong Un, ranging from the foundations of North Korean political philosophy to the founding myths of the Kim family, from the role of gender in North Korean politics to North Korea attempts at economic reform and rehabilitation.

On the whole, the chapters of *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics* are to be lauded for offering a fresh insight into the philosophical and political variables that underpin the Kim Jong Un regime. Particularly noteworthy are the efforts by the contributing authors to probe deep into comparatively little-known episodes of North Korean history and politics in a bid to explain how the modern North Korean state has evolved. Herein, the chapters by Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, Steven Denney, Fyodor Tertitskiy and Christopher Richardson are to be commended for their highly incisive analysis and utilization of data triangulation from primary as well as secondary sources to build up a

vivid portrayal of the machinations that underpin North Korean politics. In light of the enigma that is the decision-making process of Pyongyang, such a perspective provides a welcome analysis of some of the variables that appear to drive Kim Jong Un's foreign and security policy, as well as the process of political succession in North Korea. In addition, Darcie Draudt adopts a comparatively little-applied perspective on North Korean politics, namely gender. With the prominence of Kim Jong Un's attractive young wife, Ri Sol Ju as an apparent attempt by the Supreme Leader to connect with the people of North Korea, such an innovative perspective is particularly welcome. In addition, two chapters by Robert Winstanley-Chesters, who examines the environmental implications of Kim Jong Un's *Byungjin* policy, address another pressing issue of our times.

However, while *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics* seeks to take a fresh and innovative look at the political trends in the North Korean government, it falls short in a number of areas. To begin with, none of the contributing authors to this volume comes from a Korean background. While the reviewer does not in any way begrudge the content being written by scholars hailing from a Western background, it is curious that the volume editors do not explain their rationale for the absence of any scholars from a Korean (from within the ROK academic community, the Korean-American academic community, or from among North Korean government defectors) background. Given that a number of chapters written from a Korean perspective would have shed a culturally and historically unique regional insight into the thinking of the North Korean leadership, such an omission is curious and should have been justified or rationalized by the editors.

A second weakness relates to the overarching discussion of the evolution of North Korean political philosophy and doctrine. While the chapters on *Juche* ('Self-Reliance') and *Songum* ('Military First Politics') are indeed excellent in their depth and analysis, this reviewer is somewhat disappointed by the comparative lack of analysis on Kim Jong Un's *Byungjin* doctrine. Only one chapter discusses *Byungjin* in any depth, this being Winstanley-Chesters' 'Treasured Swords: environment under the *Byungjin* Line', and this looks more at the implications of *Byungjin* for the natural environment of North Korea. Such a shortfall is surprising, given that the DPRK's pattern of missile and nuclear tests since the succession of Kim Jong Un point to the North Korean leadership's commitment to its nuclear programme, as per the nuclear component of the *Byungjin* doctrine. This geostrategic backdrop would have offered an excellent opportunity to engage in fruitful analysis and dissection of

the diplomatic, military and political calculations of the current DPRK leadership, and their implications for regional security and diplomacy in Northeast Asia.

A third shortfall of this manuscript is its somewhat scanty analysis of the economic trends that arise from *Byungjin's* attempts to reinvigorate the North Korean economy. In their chapter, 'Pockets of efficiency: an institutional approach to economic reform and development in North Korea', Christopher Green and Steven Denny point to the existence of a 'Royal Court Economy' which oversees a limited level of economic efficiency in order to better serve the political and military establishment of the DPRK. Whilst such a conclusion is a logical outcome of the *Songum* doctrine practiced by the previous ruler of North Korea, Kim Jong Il, such a perspective also overlooks the fact that there is a quiet, small-scale economic revolution underway in North Korea. This is apparent from the activities of the Singapore-based Non-Government Organization, the Choson Exchange, which is involved in undertaking business management workshops to transfer skills and expertise to young North Korean entrepreneurs. Whilst there is considerable debate over the long-term viability and outcomes of the Choson Exchange's programmes, the fact that this volume contains not even one mention of it – either critically or positively – marks an unfortunate omission. Whilst this reviewer appreciates that it is not practical to cover every single aspect of North Korean politics and economy, a more balanced overview of current trends in North Korea would have proven significantly more valuable for interested observers, scholars, policymakers and other stakeholders.

Nonetheless, these shortcomings do not in any way detract from the important contributions that *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics* brings to the academic scholarship on North Korea. It is a timely manuscript, and one that makes a valiant effort to undertake incisive analysis into a country that remains an enigma for most observers. If anything, the shortfalls highlighted in this review underline why it remains imperative that the academic community continues to carry out in-depth research into the emerging trends that have followed the succession of Kim Jong Un as the Supreme Leader of North Korea.

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