

## The History of the Present: Foundational Meta-Narratives in Contemporary North Korean Discourse\*

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### Abstract

This study addresses the phenomenon of foundational meta-narratives in North Korea's discourses. Meta-narratives are understood here as a totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience. On the national level, meta-narratives refer to those over-arching, all-encompassing myths and stories that contain the historical knowledge of a country's foundational history. This paper discusses three particularly important meta-narratives permeating North Korea's contemporary political and cultural discourses: the meta-narrative of national ruin, of (Kim Il Sung's) armed resistance and of constant threat of external aggression. Providing both positive and negative frames of reference, the study shows how these meta-narratives are strategically employed in contemporary discourses as 'historical contextualizations' in which particular interpretations of the past are used as arguments for political actions in the present, and, with recourse to history, produce a normative frame for evaluating contemporary events and actions. At the same time, the historical references and myths contained in those meta-narratives play an important role in establishing identity and fostering integration, for they level differences within the North Korean community and thus construct sameness and communality.

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## 1. Introduction

*“The biggest enemy of the truth isn’t the lie, it’s the myth”*  
*(Quote from the TV show ‘The West Wing’)*

Making use of a country’s foundational history and recurring historical analogies and myths to explain current events and developments is a common feature in global political life. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is no exception to this rule. However, in the case of North Korea, making reference to the past in order to explain and legitimize contemporary political practices is arguably a more important strategy than in many if not most other countries. As North Korean scholar Ri Jong Chol (2012, 4) states, “[h]istory is not mere an account of events that have happened in the past. It carries something instructive for the people to look into the present and ahead into the future. A wise politician never forgets the lessons of history and repeats them.” As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, in the DPRK’s contemporary political and cultural discourses, this historical knowledge – and the related ‘lessons of history’ contained in it – is inscribed into a set of closely intertwined and powerful meta-narratives. A meta-narrative is understood here as a “coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories” (Halverson, Jeffrey L., H.L. Goodall & Steven Corman 2011, 14) that frames a common rhetorical script to establish audience expectations in support of a positive or negative perspective. Being deeply embedded in the particular culture, meta-narratives may be thought of as a totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience. On the national or state level, meta-narratives refer to those over-arching, all-encompassing myths and stories that contain the historical knowledge of a country’s foundational history.

In the following analysis, three particularly important meta-narratives that permeate virtually all of North Korea’s contemporary political and cultural discourses are

examined: the meta-narrative of national ruin, of (Kim Il Sung's) armed anti-imperialist struggle and of constant threat of external aggression. Providing both positive and negative frames of reference, it will be shown that these narratives are not just some distant memory of the past, but are strategically employed for specific political purposes in the present, serving both as 'historical contextualizations' and playing an important role in establishing identity and fostering integration. A significant task in the analysis of the DPRK's contemporary political and cultural discourses is thus to explore how current events, developments and policies are discursively linked to particular meta-narratives and to analyze which and how historical memories, myths and narratives are used to legitimize contemporary foreign policy practices. The analysis of contemporary political discourses such as the Military-First discourse (e.g. Jeon, Miyeong 2009) or the Diplomatic War discourse (e.g. Ballbach, Eric J. 2014) thus cannot be fully understood without discussing the historical knowledge, myths and narratives they contain. This is because the political developments after the end of the Cold War were to a large degree given meaning by creating links to these foundational narratives and by putting them in the context of the state's national history: the historical analogies and myths attach particular interpretations and understandings to contemporary developments and events.

## 2. On (the Concept of) Meta-Narratives and their Application in Contemporary North Korean Discourses

Discourses have history. This holds especially true for political discourses, in which the 'authors' regularly recur to historical events and political myths surrounding the foundation of the state in order to make contemporary developments understandable, to 'inscribe meaning' to them. Particularly in the context of a totalitarian state such as North Korea – in which historiography is both a highly political and decidedly controlled endeavor aimed at constructing a 'correct view' on the nation's history – these all-encompassing stories are usually characterized by some form of constructed transcendent and universal truth about the origins of the state and nation. Historiography, in other words, is singularized and totalized in the sense that it places all reality

within a common framework. Michael Schwab-Trapp (2006, 276) refers to such “historical contextualizations” as important discursive techniques of legitimization, in which particular interpretations of the past are used as arguments for political actions in the present, and, with recourse to history, produces a normative frame for evaluating contemporary events and actions.

At the same time, such foundational myths play an important role in establishing identity and fostering integration (e.g. Eder, Klaus 2006; Schmidt, Simone 2011; Schwab-Trapp, Michael 2002; 2006), for they level differences within a certain community and construct sameness and communality. As Herfried Münkler (1996, 26) aptly points out, “[t]he myth connects living and dead generations to a community, it constitutes a common history by relating all important events and decisions back to the narrative of the polity’s origins.” National myths are stories which convey commonly shared convictions on the purpose and meaning of the nation; they are, as Richard Jackson (2005, 35) suitably puts it, “the discursive glue that keeps a nation of different groups and individuals together; leaders create and re-create myths, especially in times of crisis, as a means of reinforcing unity.” Simultaneously, foundational myths also develop an ‘outward effect’ and thus provide the ideational foundation for the foreign political self-image and self-perception of a nation or a collective ‘we.’ “Collective identity,” Klaus Eder (2006, 167) aptly points out, “is a process, in which the ‘past’ offers orientation for contemporary actions and establishes identity by providing a positive or negative frame of reference.” Depending on the strategic interest of a state, corresponding myths are then also used to justify domestic and foreign political behavior. For instance, in his study on ‘war discourses’ in Germany, Michael Schwab-Trapp (2002, 358) illustrates how historical references are utilized as arguments for or against a participation in military interventions and he convincingly shows that what he describes as Germany’s ‘basis narrative’ (*Basisnarrative*) of National Socialism and the historical lessons of *Nie wieder Krieg* (never again war) or *Nie wieder Auschwitz* (never again Auschwitz) are closely related and linked to different demands for action (Schwab-Trapp, Michael 2002, 364).

As will be shown in the chapters that follow, North Korea’s contemporary

political and cultural discourses are similarly interspersed with particular tales from [North] Korea's history, "stories told in one specific way so as to provide certainty about a specific assumption and locate meaning within a specific context" (Bormann, Natalie 2008, 23)." In the DPRK's contemporary political and cultural discourses, the historical knowledge on the foundational history is inscribed into a set of closely intertwined and powerful historical meta-narratives: the meta-narrative of national ruin (i.e. of Japanese colonialism), the meta-narrative of (the Kim Il Sung-led) armed struggle for the country's independence and the meta-narrative of the perpetual threat of aggression from external powers. Exemplifying both positive and negative reference points, these meta-narratives serve as historical analogies that are drawn on to make contemporary developments and challenges (such as the demise of the Soviet Union or the contemporary conflict with the U.S. over North Korea's nuclear strive) understandable by providing them with a context and historical comparisons. As such, the meta-narratives help to detect familiar patterns amongst the unfamiliar and thus to control the peculiarity of the present by invoking the knowledge of the past.

However, the historical meta-narratives not only make contemporary challenges understandable by providing them with a historical context, they are also used to legitimize the (contemporary) practices that are conducted in its name. By relating to these meta-narratives, contemporary political practices (such as the DPRK's nuclear strive) are simultaneously situated in the context and are constructed as part of (North) Korea's national history. As contemporary developments are linked to these foundational myths, they themselves become part of the ongoing 'myth-making process' and the perpetual (re-)production of North Korean identity. Hence, just as the modern self-understanding of the peaceful revolution and reunification has become a vital chapter of the national German myth, North Korea's strive to become a nuclear power and the related confrontation with the U.S. has already become a central element of North Korea's 'modern myth-making,' thereby further enriching the discursive economy from which constructions of identity and claims of legitimacy are drawn.

### 3. Three Powerful Meta-Narratives of North Korean Political Discourses

#### a) The Colonial Moment: The Meta-Narrative of National Ruin

In many ways, the DPRK's national history is inevitably bound to and emanates from what North Korean texts describe as the experience of national ruin. According to this meta-narrative, the entire Korean history is one in which the Korean people had to endure national humiliation, deprivation of national sovereignty and dignity, and ultimately national division by outside Others. According to the North Korean representation, no other nation in the world has experienced the same kind and degree of interferences from external powers. While North Korean sources claim that basically the whole Korean history is one of exploitation by foreign powers such as the Chinese, Mongolians, and Americans, the stories that came to dominate this meta-narrative primarily revolve around the experience of Japanese colonialism. As Park Han S. (2002, 14) aptly point out, the era of Japanese colonialism "was one of political oppression, economic exploitation, social dislocation, demographic disintegration, and most of all, national humiliation." Providing the ultimate historical negative frame of reference, this meta-narrative is therefore based on the representation of Korea as a country that was fully lost to an external power – a 'ruined nation' whose people and state were deprived of their sovereignty and identity as Koreans. Arguing that no other state (and people) in the world has experienced the same kind and degree of human misfortune (Park, Han S. 2002, 19), the roots of North Korea's identity and the starting point of nation-building are thus firmly based in this historical experience. The meta-narrative of national ruin consequently enshrines a profound sense of national victimhood, expressed through a deep-rooted national victim narrative that influences North Korean identity to this day. This meta-narrative therefore uses the national awareness of the vivid memories of the pain caused by the Japanese colonial rule (e.g. Kim, Kyōng-mi 2009, 221; Kim, Suk-Young 2010, 193-197) in order to designate who the enemies of the nation are and what constitutes the model citizen. Hence, the boundaries between the inside and the

outside that were obscured during Japanese colonialism were re-drawn through a clear and recurrent distinction between Self and Other, inside and outside, friends and foes. Just as the notion of the foreign Other – exemplified most vividly in the meta-narrative of national ruin by colonial Japan – became a mere synonym for oppression and ‘non-Korean-ness,’ so did the notion of imperialism become the epitome of all things evil and threatening.<sup>1)</sup> However, while the constructions of identity contained in the meta-narrative of national ruin are thus naturally linked to specific Others, there are also temporal identity constructions that differentiate the sovereign North Korea of today from its own past as a colonial state that has lost its identity (see also: Diez, Thomas 2004). Referring to Ole Wæver’s (1996, 1998: 100) argument that for most of the time after the Second World War the most important ‘Other’ in the construction of a European identity has been Europe’s own conflict-riven past, for North Korea the historical experience of national ruin may similarly be regarded as the DPRK’s most significant ‘temporal Other.’<sup>2)</sup>

Accordingly, preventing another loss of independence is the essential historical lesson drawn from the experience of national ruin, North Korea’s *never again*, which is repeatedly drawn on in contemporary political and cultural discourses. For instance, when the contemporary political discourse depicts the struggle between North Korea and the U.S. in the context of the nuclear issue as a “showdown (...) which (...) decide[s] whether [the Korean people] would become an independent people or colonial slaves” (Ri, Jong Chol 2012, 41), the texts intentionally invoke the bitter memory of national ruin and thus construct the post-Cold War confrontation with the U.S. over the nuclear issue as the contemporary chapter of North Korea’s

1) It has to be reminded at this point that while the stories that constitute the meta-narrative of national ruin primarily refer to the actual experiences of Japanese colonialism, the underlying logic and the modes of inclusion and exclusion at work fully function independently of the Japanese Other. In that sense, North Korea’s contemporary representation of the U.S. reveals very similar modes of differentiation, depicting the U.S. as an imperialist power and threat that basically replaced Japan.

2) In this temporal construction, North Korea’s historical fate of a ruined nation under foreign rule is differentiated from the sovereign state that emerged with the establishment of the DPRK (e.g. Kim, Jun Hyok 2014, 82). For instance, Kim Jong Un (2012) directly invoked this temporal construction in a speech he delivered on April 15th, 2012 in P’yongyang, in which he contrasts North Korea’s past as a “small and weak, pitiful colonial nation that had to endure flunkeyism and national ruin as its fate” from the “dignified political and military power” of today (see also: Nam, Jongwoo 2012, 229; Kim Jong Il 1991).

historical struggle for sovereignty and against imperialist oppression. A scholarly book from the DPRK that comprehensively deals with U.S.-North Korea relations in the post-Cold War era gives important insights into how this meta-narrative is scripted and which historical lessons are drawn from it:

The Korean people were robbed of their country by Japan and had the sorrow and sufferings of a ruined nation to the marrow of their bones. Their parents were killed, and 6 million people were forced to hard labour like animals; one million men had to serve the Japanese army as bullet shields; nearly 200,000 women were forced to suffer as sex slaves for the Japanese army. Their natural resources, culture, names and even language were all deprived. As a ruined nation they were not treated as human beings. Here is Korea's 'grievance', and it is the starting point of the nation-building for Korea. Hence, it has become the main principle of Korea to defend the country, without allowing the aggression of foreign forces any more. (Nam, Jon Chol 2000, 41)

As peace can never be assured and wars can only be deterred, a strong military power is depicted as the only option to achieve the most central goal of preserving the DPRK's independence and sovereignty (e.g. Jo, Song Baek 1999, 200). It is here where the DPRK's rationale for the need to possess nuclear weapons is discursively situated, where the claims to legitimize its nuclear strive are rooted and where these are given a historic dimension and continuity by linking them to the meta-narrative of national ruin. In order to avoid a repetition of its historical fate as a ruined nation, a strong military and ultimately a nuclear weapon is depicted as an inevitable necessity, as the very experience of national ruin is seen as a direct result of a lack of military power in the first place. North Korea's nuclear program thus comes into effect and is potentiated as an acceptable and appropriate measure for defending the sovereignty and independence of the threatened Self against specifically identified Other(s) – primarily the U.S. – within the framework and scope of specific foreign policy discourses that immediately invoke the meta-narrative of national ruin and the contained historical lesson of defending, by all means necessary, the sovereignty and independence of the DPRK. The following quote from a *Rodong Sinmun* editorial exemplifies



particularly well how the historical memory of national ruin is strategically employed in the contemporary political discourse to legitimize its nuclear weapons program:

The Korean nation, strong in independent spirit and patriotism, was forced to ink a treaty for national ruin and had the whole country lost to the Japanese imperialists more than a hundred years ago as it failed to build up strong arms capable of protecting its sovereignty (...). A moment is enough for ruining the country but it takes a thousand years to rebuild it. The same is the case with the sovereignty. This is a bitter lesson taught by history. The same can be said of the present situation. There has never been peace on the Korean Peninsula for over six decades of national division forced by foreign forces. (...) The matchless military muscle of the DPRK put an end to the history of distress the nation suffered for it was weak and this convinced the Koreans that they can successfully achieve durable peace of the country and national reunification. (...) The DPRK has no option but to use diversified precision nuclear strike means of Korean style as the U.S. imperialists are working hard to invade it with nukes. (KCNA, March 14, 2013)

The article produces a direct link from the previous experience of national ruin to the contemporary conflict with the U.S. over the North's nuclear weapons program, in which the DPRK is said to once again face an 'imperialist state' that is threatening to undermine its sovereignty by military means. By locating the nuclear strive in the bounds of the overarching framework of the DPRK's (historic) struggle to defend its sovereignty, North Korea's present-day struggle against the U.S. is constructed as the contemporary chapter of the country's historical strive for independence and autonomy initiated by Kim Il Sung, which simultaneously implies that these endeavors are by definition righteous and just.

### **b) The Revolutionary Moment: The Meta-Narrative of (Kim Il-Sung's) Armed Resistance**

Inherently linked to the meta-narrative of national ruin and the constructions of identity contained in as well as the historical lessons drawn from it is the

meta-narrative of Kim Il Sung's armed anti-imperialist resistance. The influence of this myth on North Korea's contemporary political and cultural life can hardly be overstated. In the DPRK's historiography, Kim Il Sung's armed struggle against the Japanese is the starting point of modern (North) Korean history, a historical episode that gave rise to a meta-narrative permeating basically all aspects of North Korea's past and present political, cultural and social discourses. The meta-narrative of Kim Il Sung's armed struggle serves as a positive frame of reference and provides an important discursive basis from which basically all good qualities of the DPRK are drawn, both individually (e.g. in the form of the qualities of the leader and the people) and collectively (e.g. in form of the qualities of the nation and state). Similarly to the way the meta-narrative of national ruin was used to construct a unique identity tag as a 'victim state,' the meta-narrative of (the Kim Il Sung-led) armed struggle is invoked to represent the DPRK in terms of a 'heroic state' with a brilliant leadership. To that end, the meta-narrative tells a story of Kim Il Sung's resistance in terms of an epic tale of heroic struggle and ultimate redemption, a metaphor for Korea's transformation of its inglorious past of a ruined nation to a militarily strong and politically independent state. This highly nationalistic narrative depicts Kim Il Sung as the principle architect and ultimately the personal embodiment of the fate of the North Korean state, as is vividly exemplified by the designation of the DPRK as the 'Kim Il Sung nation.' While the basic myths about Kim's anti-Japanese struggle were already put in place shortly after the liberation of Korea, after the founding of North Korea this experience "was re-inscribed in history as the sole, heroic origin of everything that state represented" (Armstrong, Charles 2003, 229). It was on this historical foundation that not only the myths on Kim Il Sung, but the whole founding myth of the North Korean state was later build. To that end, this episode was now depicted as a solely Korean affair, and all other elements and factors that contributed to Korea's liberation were written out of history (see also: Suh, Dae-Sook 1988, 11).<sup>3)</sup> Thus, what emerged in the early years after liberation in the Northern part of Korea was a nationalist story of the Korean nation

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3) As a matter of fact, while early texts from 1945 until 1947 regularly referred to Kim's allies in Manchuria, by 1948, when a full-blown hagiography of Kim began to emerge, "his record eclipsed all other partisans, and he came to personify the anti-Japanese resistance" (Armstrong, Charles 2003, 228).

as the subject of history, Kim Il Sung as the embodiment of national subjectivity, and the Manchurian guerilla struggle as the mythical site of revolutionary genesis (Armstrong, Charles 2003, 228). By directly linking the individual myth of Kim Il Sung to the collective (national) founding myth of the state, subjective forms of knowledge are used as collective narratives that produce and reproduce the differences (and distances) to the Other(s). Kim Sung Chull (2006, 2009) consequently describes the anti-Japanese guerilla tradition as one of three constituent pillars of North Korean state identity (together with anti-imperialism and socialist principles).

As in the case of the meta-narrative of national ruin, the meta-narrative of anti-imperialist struggle too is linked to tangible political functions, above all to legitimize the (continued) power position of the Kim family and the exalted status of the guerrilla elite. As Wada Haruki (1998) has shown, the political development of North Korea reified the history of the Kim Il Sung-led partisan group's armed anti-colonial resistance activity in Manchuria as the single most important, sacred, and all-encompassing saga of the nation's modern history and the polity's constitutional history. In fact, the historical period of Kim Il Sung's armed struggle became the ideal the North Korean state continuously strives for, re-affirming North Korea as an "imagined community." From the early years of the DPRK until today, political developments and practices are constructed as operating in the name of this ideal, reflecting the fact that Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese struggle has been constructed as the true foundational moment of what would later become the DPRK. As such, the (representation of the) personal historical experiences of Kim Il Sung and his guerilla clique in the anti-Japanese struggle became the single most important legitimacy line connecting historical experiences with current policies. In fact, the history of the state and the texts and narratives yielding the sense of identity connected to this historical experiences span linearly from the early days of the anti-Japanese struggle up until the present. As is stated in Article 2 of the North Korean constitution: "The DPRK is a revolutionary state which has inherited the brilliant traditions formed during the glorious revolutionary struggle against the imperialist aggressors, in the struggle to achieve the liberation of the homeland and the freedom and well-being of the people."

### c) The Perpetual Danger: The Meta-Narrative of Constant Threat of Foreign Aggression

A third meta-narrative capturing the foundational experiences of the DPRK is the narrative of constant threat of (external) aggression. According to this narrative, North Korea faces a perpetual threat of aggression by external forces (*oese*), which, in turn, results in a permanent need for the awareness and capabilities to protect the nation's ever-threatened national sovereignty. The representation of the DPRK as an inherently threatened political entity is a common theme penetrating virtually every aspect of political and social life. Historically, this mode of representation is closely linked to the way North Korean historiography depicts the history of Korea as a nation continuously exploited by foreign powers. In contradistinction to the two meta-narratives discussed above, the meta-narrative of constant threat of external aggression is primarily linked to the U.S. as the most significant threat to the DPRK. While North Korea's historical discourses trace the origins of U.S. threat to Korea as far back as the mid-19th century, the meta-narrative of constant threat of external aggression is in many ways linked to the experiences of the Korean War. According to the North Korean representation, the Korean War did not end in 1953; even though the nature of this conflict changed over the years along with the (depiction of the) nature of U.S. threat, "the ultimate logic of the national emergency has been consistently kept intact" (Ryang, Sonia 2012, 137) and the sense of imminent and mortal threat from the U.S. has never disappeared. Even in times of political *détente*, the construction of a permanent threat and a perpetual war with the U.S. was largely upheld in the domestic discourse, reflecting the fact that a constant sense of threat is at the heart of the DPRK's political order. What Michael Leifer (2000, 6) has termed the "cult of vulnerability" in Singapore's political and social life or what Giorgio Agamben (2000, 37, quoted in: Ryang 2012, 86) has called a "camp society" therefore incontestably holds true for North Korea, too.

In this context, Sonia Ryang (2012, 85) raises the intriguing question how such a state of permanent emergency affects the life of the North Korean people: "if one's life had always been subjected to a state of emergency from the outset –

in other words, if one were to experience a state of emergency as a normal state of existence – how should such a thing as a war impact on one’s ontological self-understanding in relation to life and the world? Similarly, on the level of the state it is of equal concern how the discursive construction of a permanent threat from external aggression influences the identity and foreign policy practices of the North Korean state? Conclusively answering this question requires us to acknowledge that sustaining a state of utmost dangers and supreme emergency and creating social fears and moral panics through the construction of threats serves a number of tangible political functions for the North Korean state, such as strengthen collective identity by provoking and allaying anxiety to maintain quiescence and de-legitimizing dissent (the policing function), helping to solidify the rule of Kim Il Sung and later Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, elevating the status of security actors (such as the military or the National Defense Commission), diverting scarce resources into ideologically driven political projects (such as the nuclear project) or distracting the public from more complex and pressing social ills (such as the economic and social crises).

Following Jackson (2005, 95) it is argued that despite or because of its obvious hyperbole, creating such an all-encompassing threat is in fact essential to the political practices of the DPRK, for that danger, while often experienced negatively, can also be a creative force, “a call into being” that provides access to the world (quoted in: Campbell, David 1998, 80). In fact, it is widely accepted in critical IR scholarship that the identity of the Self is experienced and apprehended more strongly in times of increased threats. It is therefore a quite common political phenomenon and strategy to use external threats and enemies to install internal unity and coherency, for a collective such as a nation experiences its unity particularly when it is confronted with an external threat that it has to defend against. Hence, the construction of a collective identity is to a large degree facilitated by (and dependent on) the existence of external threats, which fosters the removal of existing differences, disparities and pressures (Münch, Richard 1993, 18). Seen from this perspective, the existence of an external threat is thus essential to a nation’s being, while, conversely, there is the risk that this unity is lost when this danger disappears (Schulze, Hagen 1995, 22). As David Campbell

(1998, 13) prominently argues in this regard, “[t]he constant articulation of danger (...) is (...) not a threat to state’s identity or existence: it is its condition of possibility.”

In the case of DPRK it may be argued that the existence of threats and a threatening Other is even more crucial to its very being than in most other cases. This is because “North Korea’s ontological foundations are so deeply connected with the logic of the national emergency that it has become difficult for North Koreans to imagine life without emergency, without the national enemy” (Ryang, Sonia 2012, 137). Selig Harrison (2002, 8) rightly states in this regard that North Korea’s “permanent siege mentality” has not only helped bonding the society (and the political class) together, but that the construction of a permanent state of supreme emergency also is a powerful political strategy that helps solidify the rule of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il (and now Kim Jong Un) as the ones that defend the society and the state against these threats. As the Kim clan is basically equated with the sovereignty and independence of the North Korean state and the protection of the Korean nation, the production of an identity as a warring nation reinforces a strong need to preserve the absolute nature of its leader (Ryang, Sonia 2012, 107). The state of emergency that has lasted for over 60 years now will probably continue to do so as long as the regime and/or the power relations in North Korea don’t change. This is because it is the Kim leadership as the brain of the socio-political organism that has the sole power to posit something as a threat and declare an emergency, to define a danger and how it threatens that what is said to be at risk. Danger, to once again repeat David Campbell’s (1998, 1) famous assertion, “is not an objective condition” and it consequently “is not a thing that exists independently of those to whom it may become a threat.” Instead, “danger is an effect of interpretation” (Campbell, David 1998, 2); it results “from the calculations of a threat that objectifies events, disciplines relations, and sequesters an ideal of the identity of the people said to be at risk” (Campbell, David 1998, 3). If danger is an effect of interpretation, then in North Korea it is the Kim leadership that defines what constitutes as a threat and the policies that are regarded as appropriate to counter them. However, this is not to say that the U.S. threat to the North’s security is not ‘real’ or only a mere fiction. In fact, arguably “[n]o

other country in the world has faced the threat of nuclear annihilation by the United States for nearly sixty years, as has North Korea; no other country has been for so long the explicit target of American attack” (Armstrong, Charles 2009, 45). It is the constructed reality of a permanent state of threat that, in turn, justifies a permanent state of supreme emergency and an identity of siege.

North Korea is therefore a state whose foreign policy is deeply rooted in an identity of siege and insecurity and the construction of a permanent threat from outside forces is a central element in legitimizing the foreign practices that are designated with goal of ensuring the most important goal of upholding the sovereignty of the DPRK. It is in this context that North Korea draws on the meta-narrative of constant threat of external aggression in order to justify particular political practices in the present. For instance, it is very possible that without the construction of a perpetual and all-encompassing threat, the massive efforts and expenditures that accompany the DPRK’s nuclear strive would be impossible to sustain. Importantly, the use of this meta-narrative accelerated at the time of the Iraqi invasion in 2003, which, as the author has argued elsewhere (Ballbach, Eric J. 2014), was a decisive turning point in the DPRK’s foreign policy and security strategy. While the nuclear program was long declared a viable element of the DPRK’s energy strategy, North Korean sources now emphasized the right to self-defense and the production of nuclear weapons as a means of protecting the state and nation against what it calls the hostile U.S. policy:

*“Only the physical deterrent force, tremendous military deterrent force powerful enough to decisively beat back an attack supported by any ultra-modern weapons, can avert a war and protect the security of the country and the nation. This is a lesson drawn from the Iraqi war.”* (KCNA, April 6, 2003, emphasis added)

Hence, the Iraq War was used as a pivotal argument to maintain a public discourse based on a continuous national security emergency resulting from and rooted in a representation of a perpetual external threat and the Iraq War has accelerated the DPRK’s full nuclear breakout in 2005 and 2006.

## 4. Instead of Conclusions

This study addressed the phenomenon of foundational meta-narratives in North Korean contemporary political and cultural discourses. In specific, it scrutinized three particular powerful meta-narratives, i.e. the narrative of national ruin, of (Kim Il Sung's) anti-imperialist struggle and of the constant threat of (external) aggression. Providing both positive and negative frames of reference it was shown that these meta-narratives are much more than just a distant memory of the past, but are politically imperative in a number of ways. To begin with, they are strategically employed to make contemporary changes and challenges understandable by providing them with a historical context. These 'historical contextualizations' are significant discursive techniques of legitimization, in which particular interpretations of the past are used as arguments for political actions in the present, and, with recourse to history, thus give validity to a contemporary political argument and produce a normative frame for evaluating present-day events and actions. At the same time, such historical references and myths play an important role in establishing identity and fostering integration, for they level differences within a certain community and construct sameness and communality. Moreover, it is through an analysis of these foundational meta-narratives that we can find out more about how the initial boundaries between the Self and Other, good and evil, inside and outside were drawn – and how they later developed into the foundational discursive source for the continuous re-drawing of those initial boundaries and the modes of inclusion and exclusion that construe these boundaries.

It has been shown that in the DPRK's contemporary political and cultural discourses these pivotal myths continue to be represented as embodying the very defining characteristics of the DPRK – the core of what constitutes the imagined community that is the DPRK. With its fundamental qualities traced back to its genesis, North Korea is represented as the embodiment of an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist state that derives its *raison d'être* from the lessons of national ruin, of external threat and the experience of the frontier. Given that the corresponding myths and stories are not only some historical memory of the past but became inevitably bound to what (still) constitutes North Korean national and state identity,



the history of the DPRK became effectively de-historicized and has given those myths what David Campbell (1998, 132) terms “the quality of an eternal present.” It therefore seems convincing to find this logic of inclusion and exclusion operating each time when those foundational experiences are ‘updated’ in the present. This is of course not to suggest that North Korea’s contemporary conflicts are equal to those in the past. Certainly, Kim Il Sung’s anti-colonial struggle in the 1930s was a very different conflict than the contemporary struggle with U.S. over the North’s nuclear weapons. Yet, a closer look reveals that both the ‘structural logic’ and the ‘modes of representation’ are very much alike. Seen from this perspective, therefore, the often-repeated assumption that North Korea is locked in the ‘system and mentality of the Cold War’ (e.g. Mansourov, Alexandre 2003) falls short of acknowledging that both North Korea’s external Cold War and post-Cold War era conflicts are to be seen as specific episodes in the ongoing production and reproduction of North Korean identity through the practices of domestic and foreign policy. However, this is not to say that identity and the domestic and foreign policy practices that are linked to identity remain static. Identity is not a static concept and the boundaries of the project North Korea, which are in continuous need of reproduction, are perpetually re-written and re-produced. Still, this reproduction usually operates within the logic of what is termed here North Korea’s ‘foundational modes of inclusion and exclusion,’ the initial (spatial and temporal) constructions of identity in the nexus of Self and Other. As Kim Sung Chull (2009, 2) reminds us, any change in identity is typically more or less in accordance with the logic of the reproductive and recursive process and therefore does not necessarily result in a complete deviation but rather evolves only within a certain range of variation; that is, the new course is bounded by the original identity in order to avoid an identity crisis by a complete deviation of the initial course. To be sure, each episode has elements specific to its location and participants, to time and space, but in the various historical moments we can witness the repetition of certain techniques of differentiation rather than the creation de novo of concerns, challenges, prejudices, and discursive figurations (Campbell, David 1998, 145). Moreover, the persistence of these techniques of differentiations indicates the existence of a well-established discursive economy

of contingency and the representation of identity and danger in moments of flux. Thus, what David Campbell (1998, 131) affirms with regard to the U.S. certainly also holds true for the case of North Korea: “Although abjuration has been central to [the reproduction of identity], affirmation has also been important. But what has been affirmed is a fictional representation of the past. In each of these foundational moments, at the same time that the logic of identity has succumbed to the temptation of otherness and danger has been externalized, a fictive paragon has been presented as a regulative ideal by which to make judgments.”

What makes the North Korean case even more important is the fact these foundational myths are directly linked to and permeated with the personal experiences of precisely this group whose descendants still hold political power today. In many ways, the myths of the personal experiences of Kim Il Sung thus still serve as a regulative ideal to the extent that he became the very ‘embodiment’ and ‘personification’ of the DPRK’s (constructed) foundational history. As is stated in an official account on the history of the DPRK: “It was President Kim Il Sung who successfully pioneered the victorious modern history of Korea. (...) The birth of the President was a great stroke of luck for the Korean nation an event unprecedented in the history of the nation. From then on, a new chapter was opened in the Korean history and the new origin of the Juche era. It represented the beginning of the era of Juche” (quote from: *Modern Korea*). This construction not only allowed Kim Il Sung to secure his (and his clique’s) legitimacy and establish their authority, but it immediately linked Kim Il Sung to the DPRK’s foundational history – and ultimately to the state itself. This makes an analysis of the foundational modes of differentiation contained in the meta-narratives and the initial constructions of identity and threat they gave rise to all the more important for helping to better understand how and which identities are actually re-affirmed or re-constructed in contemporary political and cultural discourses. By directly drawing on these meta-narratives – and the identity constructions they contain – present discourses are not only placed in a historical context, but are given legitimacy by being constructed as a “historical inevitability” (Ri, Jong Chol 2012, 3): present-day practices such as the development of nuclear weapons were made necessary by the challenges of the national history of modern Korea. As

such, these meta-narratives constitute the discursive economy of identity/difference from which contemporary articulations and modes of legitimization are drawn. Consequently, any substantial deviation from the boundaries of identity as constructed through these meta-narratives naturally constitutes the danger of an identity crisis. In order to understand the contemporary renderings of the North Korean state and its identity it is therefore necessary to analyze if and how the initial boundaries were re-drawn, it is essential to analyze “how North Korea differentiated itself from the outside world at the state-building stage” (Kim, Sung Chull 2009, 3) and how (the origins of) the DPRK’s foundational state identity were scripted in and through these foundational meta-narratives. Building on David Campbell (1998, 91-92) it may thus be argued that although the historicity of the constellation of dispositions associated with North Korean state identity is often elided in the practices through which they are reproduced, it is possible to re-read the central ‘foundational moments’ that have constituted the project ‘North Korea’ as scripted in contemporary political and cultural discourses and thus recover a sense of the initial modes of inclusion and exclusion at work. The study therefore revisited three of the most prominent and powerful foundational myths: the meta-narrative of national ruin, of (Kim Il Sung’s) armed anti-imperialist struggle and of constant threat of external aggression.

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