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North Korean Pomiculture 1958–1967: Pragmatism And Revolution

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Abstract

Building on past analysis by its author of North Korea's history of developmental approach and environmental engagement, this paper encounters the field of pomiculture (or orchard development and apple farming) in the light of another key text authored by Kim Il-sung, 1963's "Let Us Make Better Use of Mountains and Rivers." At this time North Korea had left the tasks of immediate agricultural and industrial reconstruction following the Korean War (1950–1953) behind and was engaged in an intense period of political and ideological triangulation with the great powers of the Communist/Socialist bloc. With relations between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union in flux and Chairman Mao's development and articulation of the "Great Leap Forward," North Korea was caught in difficult ideological, developmental and diplomatic crosswinds. Utilising narratives of development in the pomicultural sector and accompanying political literature as exemplars, this paper considers Pyongyang's negotiation of this flux as expressed in these developmental terms. Amongst the orchards of Chagang province, ultimately the paper uncovers elements of reflexivity, pragmatism and charismatic political articulation that will be familiar to the contemporary analyst of North Korean matters.

Key words: North Korea, Kim Il-sung, Agriculture, Development Narratives, Pomiculture, Pragmatism, Political Charisma

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The apple orchards at the foot of Chol Pass clearly prove before the world and history the validity of Songun and truth that it is quite possible to bring the people a happy life if the capability for self-defence is bolstered up, no matter how undisguised the imperialists may become in their moves for aggression.

—Rodong Sinmun, 2 January 2015¹

In his 2015 New Year's Speech, the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un laid out a typically broad and extensive agenda for institutional, economic, and ideological development. Kim touched upon many of the country's licit economic methods and strategies, including heavy industry, the role of the military in construction, and a focus on agricultural production. There was also a discernible emphasis on fruit: specifically, the speech indicated that the production of fruits, nuts, and fungus are important to the North Korea of Kim Jong-un for other reasons than simple supply of internal food demand; there exists a potential for economic exchange and export.

In our contemporary era in which North Korea is devoid of Cold War-era support and is forced for much of its economic and financial capacity to engage, even unwillingly, with external and capital-focused markets, it is vital to pay heed to the country's attempts to create products for possible export. However as is the case with much of North Korea's developmental approach, there is little new under the Sun, and the development of fruit production and resource has a very long history, deeply connected to Pyongyang's institutional structures and political focus. Within this paper I will present a historical narrative and analysis of the development of projects within the realm of forest-sited pomiculture between 1961 and 1967, a period situated after the immediate postwar efforts at agricultural and industrial reconstruction of the prior decade.

The new era of the 1960s found North Korea engaged in an intense period of political and ideological triangulation, with relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union in flux, and the development of Chairman Mao's policy of rapid revolutionary industrialisation through the "Great Leap Forward" posing myriad challenges.

Pyongyang was caught in an ideological and diplomatic fix. Having initially sided politically with Mao and the PRC, it was then forced to "tack" ideologically into the wind of Maoist ideological development, but to do so at far enough remove to witness the developing policy failures which would result in wide-scale famine within China.² North Korea's response to the ensuing difficulties in Chinese agricultural and forestry policy was one which re-imagined the

productive potential of forest resources and developed a more practical policy strategy focusing on the economic potential of non-timber resources in forest spaces. Specifically, North Korea developed projects and produced strategies which revolved around what was called “revolutionary pomiculture” and “revolutionary silviculture.” These strategies envisaged forests and wooded areas as areas whose focus was the development of agricultural and economic capacity through the husbandry of a multiplicity of plant and tree species. These projects, while anticipating later arable agricultural practice within North Korea of double- or triple-cropping, also mirrored North Korea’s post-Cold War tendency to exploit any opportunity for potential foreign exchange earning, through the tailoring of forestry development towards the production of exportable, saleable goods. North Korean policy and ideology surrounding this distinct period and policy area is in need of deeper investigation for historical reasons, but it is also important to recognize the salience of the data for themes and issues relating to North Korea’s contemporary industrial or agricultural development.

For institutions within North Korea, the 1950s had been an decade of enormous destruction followed by rapid and wide-ranging (re)construction. As has been widely remarked, the war of 1950 to 1953 reduced much of the urban and industrial infrastructure of the Korean peninsula to rubble. The war had also devastated much of North Korea’s rural environment. Thus a requirement for rehabilitative forestry was a key element of the immediate period of post-war reconstruction, roughly corresponding to the years between 1953 and 1957. Classical centrally organised economic planning of the type seen in the Soviet Union and the PRC was not revived until 1957 with the First Five Year Plan. This planning period, which was to have run from 1957 to 1961, focused primarily on rapid economic development and the mechanisation of the industrial sector, influenced heavily by developing Maoist industrial ideology.

Within the forestry sector much of the focus and drive of reconstruction dissipated during the period. That is not to say that we can decipher no forestry or pomicultural progress then *per se*, but rather that much of the policy direction during this time dictated by central government institutions was focused within two areas.

Firstly the need for institutional capacity building in order to control and structure project development was addressed and by the incorporation of “tree planting teams” into the structure of local industrial or agricultural organisations.³ These on-the-ground teams would be governed and directed by a Forestry Development Department which was itself embedded within the key local political institution, the People’s Committee. These Forestry Development Departments would then “appoint forestry instructors to the county people’s committees” as well as move to establish a system of what were termed “officially commending institutions, enterprises and individuals who are exemplary in this work.”⁴

Secondly, forestry (or pomiculture) was to be regarded as existing within the wider umbrella of ideological development, also including the incorporation of Maoist “mass-line” strategies into forestry and afforestation practice. However, unlike Maoist China, Kim Il-sung and North Korea regarded at this time some elements of institutional policy practice as exempt from such urgent ideology. For example, while tree planting “should be carried out as a mass movement,” there were spaces in which it was simply not practical to undertake work inspired by the mass line. Wild or remote environs were in the forestry sector to be the responsibility of “afforestation stations,” within which workers were to “assume responsibility for planting trees mainly in uninhabited mountain areas, located beyond the reach of agricultural cooperatives.”⁵ Whereas Mao was reliant on massive mobilized unskilled labor to move his proverbial mountain, in North Korea there was more skepticism about the powers of the non-mechanized masses.

It must not be forgotten however, that some of the policy directions later followed by North Korea within the pomicultural sector are also first mentioned and theorised within this era. The development of some hundred thousand hectares of orchards, and trees from which nuts and fruits could be harvested and oil or other products could be extracted.⁶ These examples were referenced as the focus of a key policy document of the time, 1959’s “On Some Immediate Tasks in Socialist Economic Construction,” a text which points to a future in which this simple reconstructive developmental paradigm in the forestry project is superseded by a multifunctional strategy with a wider repertoire of policy output.

Although North Korean texts and sources insist that the result of such planned output was the completion of the First Five Year Plan one year early, analysts such as Kim⁷ hold that in fact the rapid and wide scale goal setting, along with the action of the Chollima Movement (천리마운동 / 千里馬運動) and other influences from Great Leap Forward era Maoism, destabilised industrial sectors. North Korean industry thus experienced extenuating differences in supply and output, as well as labour shortages. Perhaps hinting at some of this disruption and in order to address imbalances springing from them, 1960 was described within North Korea as a “year of adjustment.” This adjustment however, was either successful or overtaken by events as it was followed at the end of 1960 by a new Seven Year Plan slated to run from 1961 to 1967.⁸ This plan focused heavily on the development of heavy industry, especially the production of machine tools and on the embedding of the Chollima movement within the industrial economic framework. Forestry management and the place of pomiculture within that management is regarded as key to the agricultural elements of the plan.

Within the 1960 document introducing the plan, Kim Il-sung used projects within South Pyong'an province as exemplars, especially those projects related to the development of orchards and their place in the achievement of new production capacity. Noting that North Koreans were “struggling for the future,” endeavouring to build communist society which

would be “handed down to the coming generations,” Kim linked the production of orchards to the new historical moment:

We are creating everything from scratch in our time ... This is the only way we can be as well off as other peoples and hand over a rich and powerful country to the new generation. If we plant many orchards, our people will become happier in seven or eight years...⁹

South Pyong'an was set heavy targets for orchard development and apple production. As he tended to do, Kim Il-sung set a high explicit target, as well as the expectation that it would soon be overtaken. “I think that South Pyongan Province will be able to plant some 50,000 chongbo of new apple orchards. If this province creates 30,000 chongbo of orchards, and this at a moderate estimate, it will harvest 300,000 tonnes of apples in seven to eight years...”¹⁰ South Hamgyong Province was similarly instructed to create 30,000 chongbo of orchards, but not only of apples. Instead, in South Hamgyong, apples were recommended to be cultivated along with pears, peaches, apricots, and grapes. Kim Il-sung further recommended that “many forests of economic value” be planted in the industrial province, which would be “in keeping with the Party policy on making good use of mountains.”¹¹

These initial statements from Kim Il-sung on the place of pomiculture within the field of forestry and agricultural development set the scene and the nature of future policy and ideological development so far as forestry is concerned. Forestry and timber policy as is recognisable from North Korean political literature in our current era, was to connect to Pyongyang's wider economic rationale. Forestry would have to be embedded within revolutionary politics and institutional structures, as multi-faceted and flexible in development as possible and ultimately as economically useful and productive as could be asserted or hoped for. However, these statements precede what can be regarded as the foundational event for pomiculture. Before analysing the key document of 1961, it is perhaps worth pausing to note the importance of pomicultural events within North Korea and within its more general ideological structures and conceptions.

Scholars of the economic development of either the Maoist era of the PRC or the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union will be familiar with the concept of revolutionary models. Within the Soviet context, revolutionary modelling tended to settle on the personage of a designated heroic individual, such as Alexey Stakhanov, whereas within the Chinese context productive heroism was often achieved on a geographic locale such as Dazhai village in Xiyang county (famed as the collective progenitor of “Dazhai speed” and described by Shapiro).¹² However, within the North Korean context, revolutionary models take the form of what I have termed “foundational events.”¹³

In the reclamation of tidal land for agricultural or industrial purposes, it is possible to identify foundational events as being respectively, the “Potong River Improvement Project” from

1946, and in general afforestation activity the climbing of Munsu Hill in 1947 by Kim Il-sung.¹⁴ Such events serve to crystallize the importance of a given sector, ratifying the continuation of certain practices (in some cases dating back to the colonial period) and the beginning of others.¹⁵ However, they also incorporate aspects of leadership (i.e. the more esoterically-located charismatic authority of the Great Leader), as well as practically marking the first instance of Kim Il-sung's attendance of a project within a particular industrial or agricultural sector.¹⁶ Such instances include Kim's initial moment of "on the spot guidance" surrounding both the individual project and the wider sector in general (although not necessarily the initiation of the project itself, which may have been undertaken some time earlier). These projects, the event of Kim Il-sung's visitation of them, and the guidance given by him at the time, serve to establish a benchmark through which future examples of productive activity can be measured or judged, as well as encouragement to those involved given.

The fields of pomiculture and forestry received a foundational event in April 1961, with Kim Il-sung's essay "On Planting Orchards Through an All-People Movement," in which the experience of pomicultural development within Pukchong county (북청군/北靑郡) is recounted. At its core, the text is a recounting of a meeting at which successes in the county are discussed and their implications for nationwide institutional and policy development considered. However, at the meeting, many differing strands of policy development as well as revolutionary modelling are brought together and, as such, the meeting itself is the foundational event within the pomicultural sector. The meeting and the text recounting it served to shift the focus within the wider forestry sector towards a paradigm of maximum potential economic exploitability; they also asserted that forestry and pomiculture should be incorporated into both agricultural and industrial policy. Looking toward the future, the meeting and document indicated that forestry and pomiculture were key strands of food production and also regarded as an exercise themselves in the utilisation of North Korea's appropriation of Maoist "mass line" principles.

However two interesting and as yet unseen developments within this utilisation surround issues that are normally quite opaque within North Korean texts. Firstly within "On Planting Orchards," Kim acknowledges a limited policy failure surrounding the development of apple orchards, calling attention to "the error of laying exaggerated stress on apple growing alone."¹⁷ The text then goes on to recount particular (though unnamed), examples, stating that "Quite a few counties...planted orchards on fertile fields and, worse still, some localities on the west coast planted orchards in the flat land suitable for rice paddies."¹⁸ Given the mountainous topography of North Korea, pomiculture and those tasked with its development could not rely on support and resources for its extension into into new and previously uncultivated areas. Quite often pomiculture in common with other elements of forest and timber resource would have to compete with other agricultural needs.

In these difficulties we can find echoes of the chaos engendered across the Tumen river by the “backyard furnaces” policy, a Maoist contrivance which had spread throughout China and produced enormous amounts of unusable pig iron ore at very large environmental cost.¹⁹ The ability to correct excesses was absolutely vital. However, interestingly, in 1961 Kim Il-sung negotiated the difficult terrain of potential policy failure by utilising the notion of the “revolutionary model” in order to demonstrate the change in policy direction necessary to correct unsuccessful elements. Identifying the county of Pukchong as the model and the site of the solution to the policy problem, Kim praised the locals as meritorious, “precisely [due to] the fact that they have put good orchards on the hillside unsuited to other crops.” Having endorsed the local effect, Kim Il-sung took on the royal pronoun in expressing his desire that “the experience of Pukchong county in planting fine orchards on hillsides” should be imitated nationwide, or, as he put it, “by all the other counties of our country.”²⁰

The second fairly rare occurrence within this text arrives with Kim Il-sung's reference to another country's apparent success in following a policy similar to that of North Korea. Naturally, the success being enjoyed elsewhere in the socialist bloc was used as impetus to generate a level of urgency within Korea to drive further policy change. Kim Il-sung praised the planting some 80,000 chongbo of orchards on hillsides, saying that the country had accomplished much. However, he goes on to say that “80,000 chongbo is not so much when compared with Romania”, which “not only has much more agricultural land than we do, but some 400,000 chongbo planted in fruit trees” and because North Korea has less rice paddies and dry fields, it should therefore endeavor to have “at least 300,000 to 400,000 chongbo planted in fruit trees.”²¹ Pukchong is recalled to this day as a foundational moment within DPRK economic development, the KCNA reported in April of 2011 the narrative line, reflecting the his place within North Korea's charismatic political mythology, that Kim Il Sung's acting as a result of this meeting “took measures to bring into full play the zeal of the agricultural working people, strengthen nationwide assistance to fruit farming and introduce machines and chemicals in fruit culture on a modern basis.”²²

With the Pukchong meeting established as the foundational event for pomicultural development during this period, goal orientated targets for production established and its incorporation into the wider agenda for multifunctional and economically generative forestry, the sector is firmly connected within the continual ideological development which distinguishes North Korean ideological approaches of this period. Demands for quantitative achievement are soon coupled with demands for infrastructural and technical improvement so as to promote higher levels of future achievement. This can be seen within the 1963 document “On Developing the Successes Achieved in the Rural Economy.” Here Kim Il-sung states that although “we have planted 120,000 chongbo of orchards in different parts of the country,” those involved in pomicultural development still had to “establish an effective system of orchard management so as to improve fertilization and cultivation.”²³ Within this

document it is possible to distinguish a further widening of the multifunctional paradigm in the context of pomiculture, so as to extract or generate further productive gains from the land under cultivation:

Different crops are cultivated in orchards so as to utilize the land more effectively ... you should confine yourselves to cultivating beans or sweet potatoes in those orchards in which the trees are still young [and] radish, mustard, cabbage or other autumn vegetables in the orchards with mature trees...²⁴

Moving beyond those local orchard spaces of Pukchong, this conception of multifunctional agricultural production would require greater and more extensive theoretical and practical articulation. In order to avoid tendencies among bureaucrats, technical specialists, arborealists and other connected workers to cultivate other productive crops randomly in order to increase production, further structures of institutional and political review would also be required. The arrival of such articulation and structures would, in retrospect, not be far away.

Famously the “Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country,” published in *Rodong Sinmun* in February of 1964 and subject to extensive narrative focus in North Korea during their fiftieth anniversary in 2014, underpin much of North Korea’s developmental approach within its Cold War history. The Theses certainly serve as an ideological benchmark for the wider agricultural sector during the planning period of the First Seven Year Plan. Although governing much of agricultural theory at the time and utilised much in the future ideological development of North Korea, as a sort of ideological foundational event, the Theses do not directly address the forestry or pomicultural sectors. Instead these sectors are regarded as part of the light industrial sector and not the agricultural.

However, the “Theses” do call for an agricultural and rural sector entirely centred on the three “Technological, Cultural and Ideological” revolutions. This call also echoes the drive for development and progressive movement in production capacity within the forestry and pomicultural sectors in “Let us Make Effective Use of Mountains and Rivers,” a paper delivered in Chagang province some three months after the pronouncement of the Theses. This text heralds the development of a secondary strand of pomicultural development and is in a sense another more abstract, foundational event in the policy field. Again the text separates forestry as a productive and agricultural practice from that of wider agricultural development: “Chagang Province has neither nor tideland to be reclaimed, and has only a small area of paddy fields ... It would be very narrow and short sighted for Chagang Province to try to make its people well-off by relying on agriculture alone.”²⁵ Afforestation and pomiculture themselves are not regarded by Kim Il-sung as having derived from a paradigm of conservation but from one intricately connected to economic and infrastructural productivity. As he states: “Using mountains does not mean only living by them. In order to use them fully it is necessary to create good forests of economic value before anything else.”²⁶ This is something of a developmental challenge and one which will be achieved through a

paradigm of multifunctional production. Although for Pukchong County the solution was centered around the development of orchards, for Chagang Province it is on the production of edible oils and other economically useful fruit. Noting the national difficulty of having limited acreage for planting, Kim Il-sung nevertheless called for “creating plantations of oil-bearing timbers” as a task which was “of great importance.”²⁷ Accordingly those in working in the sector in Chagang are encouraged to plant black walnut trees, Korean pepper bushes, pine-nut trees, and apricots to enable the extraction of oils both edible and industrial, as well as the planting of vines, pears, and trees from which medicinal value might be extracted, extending economic productivity within forestry policy to a multiplicity of foci. North Korean pronouncements again up to relatively recent times denote a continued interest in developments recounted by this document, the Economic Forest Institute of North Korea for instance reporting in 2006 that “new species of oil-bearing trees” had recently been developed.²⁸

This paper has been focused on a short period of time within the era of North Korea’s First Seven Year Plan, one which was to come to an end in as difficult a set of circumstances as the First Five Plan had done in 1960. Although the plan was due for completion in 1967, it was extended by three years until 1970, and according to Chung [1972] its core goals were never reached. Despite North Korea’s apparent difficulty in achieving the aims set by its planning and developmental system, the fields of forestry and pomiculture serve as, in this instance, a useful exemplar for the examination of specific elements of policy development within its institutions and bureaucratic structures. The paper has been able to introduce North Korea’s historical approach to revolutionary modelling and the use of foundational events in the exposition and explanation of change within its developmental policy and ideology. The paper has also recounted examples of projects which demonstrate something of the reflexivity which appeared common within internal North Korea policy development of this period. This reflexivity is marked by an ability to apply particular, distinct, and local solutions and directions within a policy framework which still connects to wider ideological structures, in particular those connected to its charismatic political form. Hopefully the pragmatism which existed within North Korean productive policy has been suggested, and in this context such a pragmatic sense is demonstrated by a possibly surprising focus on the maximisation of productive or economic capacity within the realm of pomiculture.

It has also been interesting to note acknowledgements within contemporary internal North Korean documentation of difficulties in the application of policy direction and of the acknowledgement of success in foreign nations in particular policy fields: not something of which North Korea is widely understood as being capable. In the author’s wider research on environmental management within North Korea, especially in the realms of hydrological engineering and forestry such themes of pragmatism, reflexivity and an approach towards policy and ideological direction and development that can be regarded as multi-functional are often encountered. These do not sit lightly with the classical academic narrative of North

Korea as having been historically an ideological and developmental “basket-case,” but perhaps in small way begin to explain why nearly 25 years after the collapse of its wider trading and supportive political bloc in 1991, North Korea has failed to collapse or implode as many assume.

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Notes

¹ Rodong Sinmun, “Introducing Large Apple Orchards at the Foot of Chol Pass”, 2014 http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2014-11-20-0008.

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⁵ Ibid, p.223.

⁶ Ibid, p.418.

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⁸ Chung, Joseph, North Korea’s Seven Year Plan (1961–1970): Economic Performance and Reforms, *Asian Survey*, Vol 12, No.6 (June,1972), p.527–545.

⁹ Kim Il-sung, “On Some Tasks of South Hamgyong Province”, *Works*, Vol 14. (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1960), p.275.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.275.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shapiro, Judith, *Mao's War Against Nature*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001).

¹³ Winstanley-Chesters, Robert, *Environment, Politics and Ideology in North Korea: Landscape as Political Project*, (Lexington Press Lanham, MD, 2015), p.64.

¹² Recounted in the texts Kim Il-sung, "Encouraging address delivered at the ceremony for starting the Potong River Improvement Project", *Works*, Vol 2. (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1946); and Kim Il-sung, "Let Us Launch a Vigorous Tree Planting Movement Involving All the Masses", *Works*, Vol 3. (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1947).

¹⁵ Record Group 242, the Captured North Korean Documents collection at the United States' National Archives and Public Records Administration facility in College Park, Maryland contains a number of sources and documents which address forestry practice and resource in 1947. This collection, especially as it was collected from facilities external to Pyongyang could be utilized in the future to explore internal narratives at both ministerial levels and in other institutions and agencies.

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¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Shapiro, Judith, *Mao's War Against Nature*.

²⁰ Kim Il-sung, "On Planting Orchards Through an All-People Movement", p.52.

²¹ Ibid, p.50.

²² KCNA.2011. Anniversary of Pukchong Enlarged Meeting Marked, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2011/201104/news01/20110401-14ec.html>.

²³ Kim Il-sung, "On Developing the Successes Achieved In The Rural Economy", *Works*, Vol 17. (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1963), p.402.

²⁴Ibid, p403.

²⁵ Kim Il-sung, "Let us Make Effective Use of Mountains and Rivers", *Works*, Vol 18. (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1964), p.255.

²⁶ Ibid, p.256.

²⁷ Ibid, p.257.

²⁸ KCNA.2006. New High Yielding Oil-Bearing Trees Developed, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2006/200602/news02/07.htm#11>.