

# The religious symbolism of the Red Banner movements in DPRK media

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*For the history, foundation and theological content of the red banner movement please read:  
Schmitz, Timo: The Red Banner philosophy as religious legitimation of the DPRK political  
apparatus in the civil life, self-published online article, 1 July 2017*

Even before the religious red banner movement really arised, several symbols already appeared as metaphors and analogies for something connected to the state and thus the importance of the state and its figures were presented like a divine order.

In the 1966 movie “Saebyöl” (새별) which means “Bright Star”, a song with the same name written by Choi Ro-sa (최로사; 1932-2011) and performed by Chŏn Hye-yŏng (전혜영) is played which is of major importance since the song is still often aired on KCTV.

According to North Korean sources:

<영화에서 노래는 조국해방전쟁의 전략적인 일시적후퇴시기 아군의 후퇴를 보장하기 위한 전투에서 기적적으로 살아 남은 주인공인 한 전사가 적후천리의 모진 곤란과 위험을 뚫고 김일성주석의 품에 기어이 안기는 과정에 발휘하는 영웅적희생성과 불굴의 의지를 감동 깊은 서정적음악형상으로 훌륭히 안받침하여 주고 있다.> <sup>1</sup>

While this shows the loyalty to Kim Il-sung and the will to save his life under all circumstances for the good cause till the last drop of blood, the description now puts in a mythological description when it states:

<가사에서는 어두운 밤 밝은 빛을 뿌리며 반짝이는 새별과 같이 그 어떤 절해고도속에서도 오직 김일성주석만을 믿고 그이의 품속에서 영생하려는 주인공의 높은 충성심을 비유적인 시형상수법으로 절절하게 노래하고 있다.> <sup>2</sup>

Here, the bright star which later took in the function of a messenger in the red banner belief, is lightening the night, like a sparkling light which depicts hope, and the warrior shows constant loyalty to his unreachable far-away master to sacrifice himself for the heavenly cause.

The first verse of the song goes as follows:

<저 하늘에 별들이 많고 많아도  
마음속에 빛나는 새별은 하나  
별이여 비쳐다오 등대와 같이  
우리 앞길 찬란히 비치여다오> <sup>3</sup>

This already shows the metaphysical importance, as “저 하늘에” means “In the sky”. However, the word “하늘” does not only refer to sky, but also “heaven” and by adding an addressing form “하늘님”, it becomes “god”. Thus, the first sentence means “In the sky there are stars, many and many” or “In the sky there are many stars”. “마음속” means “mind”, and thus “in the mind is shining (마음속에 빛나는), the second part means “a lighting star which is one”. The bright star bears the subject form with it, which means that everything described goes from the bright star, thus there is a oneness of the bright star shining in the minds. This probably refers to the “one nation”-idea in North Korea in which the Korean nation has a superior function among the other nations and the compatriots have to build a oneness to work as one unit showing loyalty to the leader. The next part “별이여 비쳐다오” shall refer to a reflection, the bright star shall reflect ‘like a lighthouse’ (등대와 같이). However, 같이 also means ‘together’, and thus emphasizes the oneness, that the small nation has to act like the light – the one bright shining star in the sky which glows more than any other one.

The second verse goes as such:

<새별처럼 청춘을 빛내이자고  
굳은 맹세 다지며 그대 떠났네  
별이여 전해다오 나의 노래를  
사무치게 그리운 나의 님에게> <sup>4</sup>

The word “새 별처럼” means “like a bright star”, while “빛내” already shows reference to the imperative form of shine, as known from the first verse. The word “청춘” literally means springtime and is an analogy for youth. It is in object position so the subject refers to it. The sentence therefore can be translated “Let’s shine like a bright star youth”. Both, the term spring and the bright star are metaphysical references, as the star shall be guidant, and at the same time is unreachable, but also a sign of hope, while spring has an important connotation in Korea, since it also represents flexibility, a vividly life, but also innocence (like a small innocent child), and therefore purity.

In the next line, the words “굳은 맹세” are outstanding, as it means “unbreakable oath”, which is a double reference. An oath already is something holy in the red banner philosophy and therefore something unbreakable, the reference ‘unbreakable’ thus can be seen as tautology. The whole sentence can be translated as “with a firm oath you are leaving”. It leaves a strong impression if one regards the first line. A person full of joy and purity pledging unbreakable loyalty is leaving somewhere, it is one of the greatest heroic deeds for Koreans. In military-first Songun Korea of the 1990s, this strong verse even gets further important, as the nobility of the military and the loyalty towards the leader who is venerated like such a star, shall give the impression, that the people fighting for the fatherland and the ‘holy government’ are actually one unit, and therefore, the people are in a divine mission.

Even further, the star becomes “나의 노래를“ (my song), or more literally the thing that one sings about, and it remembers of the heroic songs about the revolutionaries who are eternally remembered in these songs.

Another pre-red banner song is “Star of Korea” (조선의 별) which appeared in the movie bearing the same name, which is a mixture of authentic Korean history and North Korean propaganda to praise and legitimate the government. It is probably one of the most important sources to get a full overview of contemporary Korean history, but at the same time, like most sources about the Korean independence struggle, it is one-sided and biased in favor for one special group. The lyrics were allegedly written by Kim Hyuk (김혁) in 1928, two years before his death. Kim Hyuk was an important Communist poet from the Jilin Circle who ran a literature magazine in the 1920s. However, today he is mostly forgotten and almost all we know about him is delivered from North Korean sources. Being part of the Jilin Circle, it is likely that he knew Kim Il-sung personally, and therefore he composed works for his revolutionaries. However, he was only one of many intellectuals who supported Communist

warfare and there were many different small guerilla armies, which were mostly deleted out of Korea's history.

However, according to Radio Free Asia, the whole depiction of Kim Hyuk in the movie was a hoax and he was not detained by the Japanese. Even further it is not clear whether he really died at that time or whether he lived on.

Radio Free Asia writes:

<영화에서 그랬듯이 김혁이 일제에게 체포될 위기에 처하자 뼈라를 뿌리고 “한별만세!”를 외치며 건물에서 뛰어내린 것도 사실이 아닙니다. 총상을 입고 일제에게 체포된 것까진 나왔는데 그 이후 죽었는지 살았는지 알 수 없습니다. 다만 당시 이종락이나 김광렬같은 훨씬 더 쟁쟁한 혁명가들도 전향을 했던 시절이라 아마 김혁도 전향했을 가능성이 높습니다. 아님 고문 중에 죽거나 했을 겁니다.

김혁의 행적이 잘 알려지지 않은 것은 당시 만주에선 청년이면 다 혁명에 나섰기 때문에 일제도 웬만한 사람은 기록하지도 않았습디다. 김혁의 기록이 없다는 것은 그가 별로 대단한 혁명가는 아니었다는 뜻입니다.> <sup>5</sup>

Conspiracy theorists even claim that he did not know Kim Il-sung personally, others rumor that the character is just made up, since nothing is really known about that person.

However, I doubt the report of Radio Free Asia as much as I doubt the official picture of Kim Hyuk in North Korea itself. It is just a fact that Kim Il-sung's guerilla group was not that famous that we have any secured information about the guerilla's activities. However, though he was not famous it does not mean that his group was not important, since they aligned with other groups and had a secret hiding on Mount Paektu. Anyways, they were defeated in Manchuria and fled to the Soviet Union where they joined the Red Army. Concerning Kim Hyuk, we can assume that he was a poet based in Jilin, supporting the liberation of Korea, admiring Communist groups. Everything else is speculation. His background is as much speculation as his relation to Kim Il-sung or his revolutionary activity. Though, it is very likely that he heard of Kim Il-sung at least by name if he was really based in Jilin.

Even further, there is no mentioning of the name Kim Il-sung, his ideological view or any group in the song.

Let’s take a look at important points of the song. It starts like this:

<조선아 자유의 노래 부르자  
2 천만 우리 동포 새별을 보네>

The first word 조선 is a common name for Korea and was used during Ri-dynasty as self-reference as well as during Japanese occupation, where it was called “Chosen”. The whole phrase “조선아 자유의 노래 부르자” means “For the freedom of Korea, let us sing”. It just indicates that the people shall put up their voice for the liberation struggle against Japan. The second phrase “2 천만 우리 동포 새별을 보네” means “Our 20 million compatriots are looking up to the bright star”. There is no further definition of the bright star. The importance of the star in Korea is already pointed out, and the red star is the symbol of Communism. Kim Hyuk possibly just glorified the star in the sense, that people are looking up to Communism as a means for freedom and liberation. There is no reference that the bright star is Kim Il-sung, nor that it has any meaning as later shown in the movie. The bright star rather depicts Communism as hope for the future and as golden way of liberation.

In Red Banner 1990s Korea, the religious groups saw the “Bright Star” reference as religious symbol, so that all Koreans shall venerate the Kims for the future of Korea.

This is also clarified in the first verse of the first stanza <조선의 밤하늘에 새별이 솟아> which means “When night arrives in Korea, a bright star shines up”. In the religious Red Banner movement, the reference is understood as star to guide the people, and therefore astrological symbols are put inside mixed with veneration for the Kims.

The Red Banner movement as a religious movement is almost unknown to the outside, which is no surprise since it addresses the less and least educated people who have a strong belief in shamanism and Confucian veneration, and therefore the political line is taught as religious doctrine to them to assure their loyalty. Since these people have no access to television or common DPRK media, this movement is never mentioned or openly addressed, since the higher privileged people who have access to television are rather agnostic or atheist. However, religious symbols and sites are often depicted subliminally. For instance in the music video <영원히 한길을 가리라><sup>6</sup>, the snowy mountains known from revolutionary stories are shown, which are holy for believers in shamansim, since souls gather there. At 1’44, a holy

site is shown with a description of the 'dear leader'. I guess that it is near Mount Paektu, though I am not sure. Shortly after, the flag of the Paektu revolutionaries is shown. One has to keep in mind that Mount Paektu is a sacred place for all Koreans, and that the sacred sites are mixed with Communist images, such as the images of the revolutionaries and the red flag. One also has to keep in mind that North Koreans conduct pilgrimages to such holy places, as shown in the video. Also the parade in which an ocean of red colors and flags appear is an important sign of loyalty that appears in Red Banner belief, since it grasps citations and symbols of the government. The naming of the alleged birth place of Kim Jong-il as Jong-il peak is also important and appears in songs, such as <더 좋은 레일로>, the thunderlights in the music video are a metaphysical symbol for the heavenly birth in that difficult times of the nation. Sunrises and sunsets also play an important metaphysical role in Red Banner belief and can be found very often in visualized media, where it depicts the birth of the nation and the coming better future. Kim Jong-il was even venerated as sun of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The North Korean media often shows gatherings of party meetings in the news, however, one can often see the holy places there as well, as they do not meet in party centers or in halls, but come together like a sermon near hills or mountains (which are holy!) to recite party politics and literature and do oaths of loyalty. It is no coincidence that these gatherings are conducted on sites that are considered sacred or holy for the local citizens. In this way, people shall strengthen their 'divine belief' in the state. However, the original traditional Shamanism is not tolerated, as it does not include the Kims, and is rather conducted by people illoyal to the government as they seek hope in fortune telling or getting to know about their future and seeking help against the regime by the spirits. In addition, the Lunar New Year is publicly celebrated and families gather together. In rural North Korea, it is conducted as religious festival. However, here again people come together to praise the Kims, as can be seen in the AP footage, thus this traditional festival (where also traditional games are conducted) is brought together with the Kims <sup>7</sup>.

As the country controls all the media, people mainly have faith in the first two Kims, though the third one is getting more and more unpopular <sup>8</sup>. However, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are venerated by the majority of the North Koreans, and their reigns are mainly seen positive. Many people therefore do pilgrimages to places where the Kims are said to have done great deeds, and it is regularly covered up in the media, though it is rarely explained that the people have a religious motivation, since the receiver of the information are atheist and anti-superstitious. However, media coverage is conducted from the places of pilgrimage since it

shall strengthen the loyalty and even further since there is nothing else to report from North Korea in their own media. Anyway, despite the usage of religious symbols in the media and the coverage of pilgrimages, many people in the Rost Belt assumingly revert to traditional shamanism, as they are anti-governmental, but they also have no access to media. Therefore, North Korean media can also use gatherings from anti-governmental areas to provide it as pro-governmental gatherings, as people can hardly control it and thus the image of a common faith is kept up.

**Notes:**

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6. 화면음악 영원히 한길을 가리라, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmQfIFUIYDo> (retrieved on 15 July 2017)
7. AP: North Koreans mark the lunar new year with family gatherings in Kim Il Sung Square, Associated Press, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXczhKY76uA> (retrieved on 15 July 2017)
8. Schmitz, Timo: The economic situation of North Korea – 2017, self-published online article, 1 July 2017, <https://schmitztimo.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/the-economic-situation-of-north-korea-2017.pdf> (retrieved on 15 July 2017)

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