Chollima, the Thousand Li Flying Horse: Neo-traditionalism at Work in North Korea

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the lens of Neo-traditionalism to elucidate the largely unexplored political aspect of the Chollima (or Flying Horse) Movement of North Korea. With its widespread use of a mythical, speedy horse from China as a rallying cry to inspire workers, this late 1950s and early 1960s worker mobilization movement was above all a series of legitimacy-enhancing exercises and the primary means by which the North Korean regime preserved the hegemony of Kim Il Sung following the Korean War. The term Neo-traditionalism is reformulated to correspond with what the Chollima Movement involved: namely, the excavation and systematic reproduction of some element of a culture’s past, the framing of that traditional element or return to some form of traditional authority as progressive or modern, and the practice of making the reprocessed fragments of tradition a pervasive and permanent part of modern culture.

Keywords: Chollima Movement, Neo-traditionalism, Kim Il Sung, modernization, mass mobilization, Symbolic Ideology, propaganda, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Great Leap Forward, East Asia

Introduction

“Chollima” (千里馬) literally the “Thousand Li Horse” served as both the slogan and emblem of a late 1950s and early 1960s mass mobilization campaign called Ch’ollima undong (천리마 운동) in Korean and is often termed the “Flying Horse Movement” in English. Referring to a horse that can travel a long distance in a short period of time and coming from a wide range of premodern Chinese texts, Chollima started out in North Korea as a rallying cry to motivate North Korean workers and ended up as the most potent symbol for North Korea’s proposed path towards prosperity. In the decades following the Chollima Campaign, the Chollima (both as a horse and a movement) have remained influential. Until he died in 1994, Kim Il Sung continued to make references to it (Lee, Hy-sang 2001, 27-28), and in 2000, his son Kim Jong Il sought to recapture the spirit of the Chollima Campaign by integrating the image of the flying horse once again into the collective consciousness of the people of North Korea (McEachern 2010, 118-27). Two signs of the lasting imprint of the “Flying Horse” on daily life in North Korea today are the towering Chollima statue in Pyongyang (constructed in 1961) and the fact that the North Korean soccer squad is called the Chollima team.

Despite the centrality of the Chollima Movement and the Chollima horse
to North Koreans, few scholars outside of North Korea have accorded either much attention. With the exception of one or two books and a select few dissertations, most English-language works on North Korea devote little more than a few paragraphs to the movement and for the most part focus on its economic aspects, largely ignoring its relevance to North Korean ideology and culture. Several researchers who do give some attention to the Chollima Movement portray it as little more than an instance of borrowing from the Great Leap Forward of China, which occurred at roughly the same time. While they are certainly correct to point out the undeniable influence China (as well as the Soviet Union) had on the Chollima Movement, they hardly take into account the unique role the Chollima Movement played inside North Korea and its impact on the past and present policies of the regime.

This work uses the lens of Neo-traditionalism to explore the political dimension of the Chollima Movement. As one of several terms scholars have used for describing communist societies, Neo-traditionalism captures the deliberate process of how the North Korean regime co-opted an ancient archetype from the past and systematically reproduced it for the domestic goal of political consolidation. Although on its surface it was an industrialization campaign waged under the banner of socialist construction, it was at its core a series of legitimacy-

1 Li 里 is a traditional Chinese unit of measure that has ranged from 300-700 meters depending on the time period.
2 In this work, I use the terms “Chollima Movement” and the “Chollima campaign,” interchangeably. The “Chollima Workteam Movement” however refers to a specific campaign within in the overall Chollima movement.
enhancing exercises to maintain the hegemony of Kim Il Sung and secure his position as dictator of North Korea.

Involved within this campaign was a larger mission to strengthen the autonomy of the North Korean state against the international hegemony of its two more powerful neighbors. In terms of its content—manifest in domestic propaganda and initial forms of social organization—the Chollima Campaign was socialist, largely derived from similar movements taking place in China and the Soviet Union. Yet in the way it played out in practice, the movement was highly nationalistic with the overall goal of elevating the Korean Worker's Party and reducing the influence of particular and pluralist groups inside North Korea (especially those with ties to the two neighboring communist countries mentioned above).

At first glance, ascribing the term Neo-traditionalism to this nationalist North Korean movement seems paradoxical. After all, a mythical creature from the past of a foreign country served as an unlikely mascot for a nationalist North Korean movement to accelerate the process of industrialization. However, throughout history, the inhabitants of the Korean peninsula have long considered Chinese civilization worthy of imitation and modification, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was no exception to this practice. While North Korea almost certainly had the Great Leap Forward of China in mind when adopting the “Thousand Li Horse” slogan of the Chollima Campaign, the most salient and ubiquitous feature of the campaign was not the borrowing from Chinese policy but the integrating of its own political objectives with Chinese mythology—the remythologizing of the horse itself.

**Neo-traditionalism: The Positive Enforcement Mechanism**

Before discussing the role of the Chollima in contributing to the functioning of a Neo-traditionalist system, it is first necessary to identify what the term Neo-traditionalism signifies and how I use it to shed light on the North Korean political system. While there has yet to be a precise definition of the term that is commonly agreed upon, the way Charles Armstrong describes it as “the communist system fall[ing] back on networks and relationships that are highly personalized, reminiscent of a ‘traditional’ society but directed towards modern goals such as industrialization” is particularly useful for the case of North Korea. Armstrong uses the term Neo-traditionalism in this context as an alternative to the standard view of North Korea as simply adhering to Totalitarianism and as one of several historical periods for North Korean political development. Rather than assessing that the late 1950s and early 1960s Chollima Movement as an instance of Neo-traditionalism, however, Armstrong considers the 1990s with the emerging themes of ethnic nationalism and the “discovery” of the bones of Tangun (the legendary founder of Korea) the era in which Neotraditional features of North Korean society were most prominent. Instead of Neo-traditionalism, Armstrong prefers the term “Mono-organizational Society” (coined by T. H. Rigby), as an alternative to Totalitarianism for the late-50s to 60s period during the Chollima Campaign. According to Armstrong, Totalitarianism is too total a concept for understanding the DPRK and
is “a kind of horizon toward which the state aspires but can never reach” (Armstrong 2003, 42). The Mono-organizational label works better for Armstrong because it takes account of the fact that the regime only allowed one channel for legitimate organization but could not always stop forms of non-state action.

Armstrong is certainly correct to point out the unlikelihood of a society ever becoming completely totalitarian, and the alternative term he uses, Mono-organizational Society, is not an inaccurate description of the state of affairs in North Korea during the period of the Chollima Movement. Indeed, a major component of the campaign was to absorb the art and literature establishment into a single message or mouthpiece of the regime. However, much more can be said of the content of that message, particularly when it involved the rebranding or rather remythologizing of a familiar archetype originating so far in the past.

Another useful description of Neo-traditionalism comes from Andrew Walder, who posits Neo-traditionalism as a midpoint between Totalitarianism, which involves complete dominance over all aspects of life, and Group Pluralism, which involves genuine political competition among various actors. Unlike Totalitarianism, Neo-traditionalism makes use of positive incentives and relies on highly personal networks to ensure loyalty on a face-to-face basis in order to maintain compliance with party policy. Unlike Group Pluralism, Neo-traditionalism exercises control through established social institutions and does not allow room for spontaneous political behavior (Walder 1998, 2-8). Walder’s take on the term lends itself well to the case of the Chollima Movement. Not only does it capture its endgame of allowing only one legitimate channel for political and social behavior (the Mono-organizational), but it also demonstrates its means: routinized, largely positive means of enforcement for promoting and preserving its legitimacy.

I have chosen to reformulate the term Neo-traditionalism, defining it as the excavation and systematic reproduction of some element of a culture’s past, the framing of that traditional element or return to some form of traditional authority as progressive or modern in order to win support of the population, and the practice of making the reprocessed fragments of tradition a pervasive and permanent part of modern culture. Following a section on historical background, I have structured this article around these aspects. With the exception of the historical background section, which explores the motivation of the Chollima Campaign from an international perspective, the focus of this article is on domestic developments, particularly in the area of propaganda, rather than international relations.

My methodology for approaching the Chollima Campaign is to analyze the rhetorical function of various references to the Thousand Li [Flying] Horse and related themes, documenting instances of what Katherine Verdery calls “symbolic-ideological” means of control. Verdery has used this term to discuss the challenges of small, weak socialist states to secure control over the means of production and the working population. Because they lack financial resources and can only go so far in using coercion, they rely on this “symbolic-ideological” domain or as she puts it the “[saturating] of consciousness with certain symbols and ideological premises
to which subsequent exhortations can be addressed” (Verdery 1991, 85-86).

This approach shares a lot in common with that taken by North Korean literature specialist B. R. Myers who has also looked at “symbolic ideology” as a form of power (although he does not identify it as such). Myers has concluded that a wide range of propaganda material from the late 40s through the present reveals a race-based ideology that Koreans are a pure race that has been victimized throughout history and are thus in need of a strong, parental leader to take care of them. Perhaps due to the fact that he places a low priority on propaganda dealing with domestic issues like worker mobilization, though, Myers fails to take account of the fact that North Korean propaganda had different approaches for different time periods.3 While the ethnic nationalist material, which Myers highlights, uses negative appeals of an external enemy threat, the Chollima Campaign relied primarily on positive appeals like honoring the unstoppable modern worker, embodied in the myth of the Thousand Li [Flying] Horse.

The sources I use come from some of the most widely distributed texts of the Chollima Campaign. These include but are not limited to songs, poems, articles, plays, testimonials, and other works from the monthly literary journal Wŏnson Chosŏn munhak, the children’s literary journal Adong munhak, and various domestic newspapers as well as worker’s leaflets, propaganda posters, and Kim Il Sung speeches all from the late 1950s to early 1960s. All of the primary source material came from the North Korean Resource Center located in Seoul, South Korea. I accessed this material from May to August of 2011. Unless otherwise cited, all the translations in this work are my own.

**Historical Background: The Reinvention of Mass Mobilization**

According to an official North Korean encyclopedia entry, the Chollima Campaign first took off on December 28, 1956 when Kim Il Sung summoned the leaders of a steel mill in Kangsŏn and made a historical speech called “Let’s mobilize to the maximum extent to produce more steel” (“Ch’ŏllima undong” 2007, 601). Handbooks from the time it was occurring called it a “historical movement that not only included production and technology but all aspects of social life from culture to ideology to morality” (“Uri nara sahoeju ūi könsŏl esŏu Ch’ŏllima chagŏppan undong.” 1961, 3). This domestic reporting of the movement is at odds with the way Western scholars have described the Chollima Movement in the past half-century, with the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for instance, calling it an “economic program patterned on China’s Great Leap Forward” (“Korea.” 2010, 506) and until very recently, several outside historians of North Korea not even recognizing or mentioning the December 1956 date at all.4

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3 Kyung-Ae Park provides evidence for this by documenting the shift in pedagogy from nationalist sentiment to socialist construction starting in the late-1950s maintaining that “as a regime successfully consolidates its power, it requires a more positive base for its legitimacy through political integration than the simple repudiation of other nations” (Park Kyung-Ae 1984, 66).

4 B. R. Myers is one scholar that has claimed North Korean historians deliberately “backdated” the date of the movement to make it look less like a copy of the Great Leap Forward in China (Myers 2010, 41).
While there is this great disagreement over the exact starting point of the Chollima Campaign, the whole concept and practice of mass mobilization campaigns was nothing new to North Korea by the late 1950s. Soon following liberation from Japan in 1945, North Korea sponsored numerous campaigns to mobilize its workers into increasing production, and by 1947 North Korea had adopted the socialist competition model called Stakhanovism from the Soviet Union. Named after Alexey Grigoryevich Stakhanov, the illustrious coal miner who reportedly mined 102 tons of coal in less than six hours (Shmemann 1985), this form of mass mobilization involved speed campaigns to fulfill production goals and the idolization of model workers that exceeded those goals. At this time, North Korea was also importing elements of the Maoist “mass line” from China, via the Yanan faction, which had strong ties to Mao (Kim Cheehyung 2010, 164). Members of this Yanan faction circulated translated materials that included Maoist slogans such as “the party must be completely within the mass” (Armstrong 2003, 61).

In 1947, there was the launch of the Production Shock Movement, one of the first campaigns to incorporate elements of both the Stakhanovite mass movement and the Maoist mass line. This campaign featured Kim Hoe-il, who was considered the North Korean version of Stakhanov. From that point on, the practice of recognizing labor heroes and model workers became a prominent feature of mass mobilization campaigns inside North Korea. This policy of labor heroes was “a system of recognition, propaganda, education, and supporting the livelihood of workers whose labor performance was superior to others.” The state used these labor heroes or model workers as “instruments of hegemony” by reproducing the stories for the masses, and creating an expectation that the masses would follow their example (Kim Cheehyung 2010, 164). The early mobilization campaigns largely succeeded in their basic objectives to increase production and connect individuals to the central ruling structure. One sign of boosted production that likely resulted from these campaigns is that from 1947-1948 and from 1948-1949, industrial production increased 54% and 38% respectively (French 2005, 76). As for centralization, by 1949, 90.7% of North Korean industry was in the public domain (Park Kyung-Ae 1984, 63).

The 1950-1953 Korean War brought new challenges to a state that had only been around a short time. With about half a million of its people killed and eighteen out of twenty-two of its major cities at least half-destroyed, North Korea was in a state of mass disarray (Cumings 2011, 160). Not only did the Korean War fail in its objectives to spread the North Korean system to the rest of the peninsula, it also disrupted the political stability and consolidation that had already been achieved. Before tackling the issue of regaining political stability, however, there

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3 In the 1950s, there were four political factions of the North Korean Worker’s Party: the Domestic Faction (which had ties to the South Korean Communists), the Soviet-Korean faction (which had ties to the Soviet Union), the Yanan faction (which had ties to China), and the Guerilla faction (which Kim Il Sung belonged to). See: Lankov 2002.
was the immediate issue of rebuilding the war-shattered economy. To address this problem, Kim Il Sung launched the Three Year Plan (1954-1956), which restored economic productivity to its pre-war levels (Park Kyung-Ae 1984, 63).

Related to the long-term problem of reestablishing political stability was the issue of what to do about the two powers that had assisted North Korea in the war: China with soldiers and the Soviet Union with arms and economic support. After all, these countries did not simply assist North Korea for benevolent reasons; they hoped to increase their influence in the DPRK and obtain something in return for their assistance. The Soviet Union, for instance, expected North Korea to be a cheap supplier of raw materials while at the same time it sold products to the country at above the market rate (French 2005, 76). China, on the other hand, sought to make North Korea a follower of its brand of socialism and thus break the small communist country away from the influence of the Soviet Union.

In 1956, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev denounced his predecessor Josef Stalin (who had died three years earlier) and promised a more humane version of socialism than before, many of the Soviet-Korean faction of the Korean Worker's party hoped that North Korea too would participate in this wave of destalinization and reform. Yet the Soviet Union, for the most part, kept its distance from this Soviet-Korean faction, and it was the Chinese-friendly Yanan faction that ended up challenging the leadership of Kim Il Sung openly at the historic August 1956 Plenum. The challenge failed, but the very instance of it demonstrates that there were prominent figures inside North Korea who were beginning to feel uneasy with the leadership of Kim Il Sung.

In responding to this challenge of factionalism and dissent, the Chollima Campaign would be quite a different kind of campaign than the previous mass mobilization campaigns. Early mobilization and nationalization projects in North Korea faced little resistance from the population because they were considered extensions of the colonial struggle against Japan. The prominent slogans at this time focused on nation-building and nationalism rather than socialism or communism (Park Kyung-Ae 1984, 6). Charles Armstrong describes the overall atmosphere during this period as “Stalinist in form, but … nationalist in content” (Armstrong 2003). The new struggle of the mid-1950s was not so much against remote Japanese colonialism or even American imperialism as much as it was against domestic dissidents, whom Kim saw as political proxies of China and the Soviet Union. As the task of mobilization shifted from winning the support of the population to maintaining that support against domestic and international threats to Kim Il Sung’s leadership, the discourse of mobilization movements shifted from nation building and nationalism to socialist construction and the creation of the new socialist man. Because the Chollima Movement was primarily a domestic consolidation effort that incorporated contemporary practices taking place in China with the age-old Soviet practice of mobilization, it might be best described as nationalism in form but socialist, Stalinist, and even Maoist in content.

Although the Chollima slogan was not used widely (if at all) until 1958, the December 1956 date, which North Korea recognizes and many Western scholars reject, deserves our consideration. For one thing, there was a Central Committee
Plenum meeting of the Workers’ Party of Korea that largely focused on expanding ideological work and purging foreign elements from it (Kim Il Sung Works, 10: 363). Moreover, after presenting the Five-Year Plan to Khrushchev, a North Korean delegation failed in its mission to secure aid from Moscow to help pay for it, which prompted North Korea to proceed with the Five-Year plan on their own with significantly less capital than they intended to start with. Finally, there was the speech to the leading workers and managers of Kangsŏn Steel Mill, which North Korea officially recognizes as the starting point of the Chollima Campaign (“Ch’ŏllima undong.” 2007, 601). As the story goes, Kim Il Sung made a speech that was so inspiring that the workers immediately held a rally, shouted “Let us dash forward at the speed of the Chollima!” and ended up producing 120,000 tons of rolled steel in the following year (Lee Hy-sang 2001, 27).

What actually happened was probably less dramatic than the above description. A domestic newspaper article published shortly after the date of the speech does report that Kim used the speech to mobilize support for the first Five Year Plan beginning in 1957 and remind the steel workers of their essential role in carrying out that plan. Yet according to this article, the steel workers were so motivated by Kim’s speech that they said they would go beyond the goal of 20,000 tons of steel. Furthermore, the slogan at the time was not “Chollima” but “Boost Production and Economize” (“Kim Il-sŏng tongji Kangsŏn chegangso rodongja dŭl kwa tambwa.” 1956, 1).

In 1958, the subject content of Kim Il Sung’s speeches centered largely around bringing a new sense of fervor to mass movements. From January to August of that year, there were speeches commemorating mass mobilization efforts in a variety of fields including cinema, health and sanitation work, consumer goods production, and railroad construction (Kim Il Sung 1982). During this period as well, there was regular, even friendly exchange between the leaders of China and North Korea, and there were instances when North Korea took directly from Chinese policies. A campaign by North Korean cultural czar Han Sŏr-ya in May of 1958 to recruit writers from the masses is but one example of such imitation (Szalontai 2005, 130).

Nevertheless, during the same time period of these mass movement campaigns, some of which North Korea took directly from China, Kim Il Sung was purging members of the Chinese-friendly Yanan faction including Kim Tu-bong, former chairman of the North Korean Worker’s Party and nominal head of state until 1957. To historian Balázs Szalontai, the purge of Kim Tu-bong was an expression of Kim Il Sung’s nationalism and signified that he no longer felt bound by China and Soviet Union and their disapproval of his actions (Szalontai 2005, 130). What supports this premise is a speech from February 1958 when Kim Il Sung denounced Kim Tu-bong, calling him a member of the “petty-bourgeois” and claiming that members of this “petty-bourgeois” clique wanted “to pursue a neutral policy towards both the Soviet Union and the United States” (Kim Il Sung 1982, 84-85).

One of the first times Kim Il Sung used the Chollima slogan was at an event celebrating the tenth anniversary of the DPRK on September 8, 1958:
Today our country is making an enormous leap forward along the road of socialism. All factories and enterprises are launching a mass campaign to increase production and economize. In all fields of socialist construction the working people are setting up new records and doing wonders. They are aware of the correctness of the Party policy and are rushing forward towards socialism at the speed of Chollima (Kim Il Sung 1982, 408).

From the word choice of “enormous leap forward,” we can see that whoever came up with the call to race forward at the speed of the Thousand Li Horse almost certainly had the Great Leap Forward in mind. We can also see from the language “increase production and economize” that North Korea from the beginning did consider the Chollima slogan an extension of its own slogan “Boost Production and Economize” from the Kangsŏn Steel Mill Speech in December of 1956.

What had begun as a mere slogan soon became a resounding appeal for acceleration and consolidation of existing campaigns, a truly massive mobilization effort. For the most part, workers had to suffer through four to five hours of unpaid work in addition to the eight-hour work day. These extra hours of work did not include the political meetings they were required to attend as well (Szalontai 2005, 121). According to Song Hyerang, the maternal aunt of Kim Jong Il’s first son Kim Jong-nam, “every nook and cranny of an individual’s private life was subject to investigation.” During forty day and hundred days of continuous work called “battles,” women stayed at the work place until midnight and men did not even come home at all (Kim Hyung-chan with Kim Dong-kyu 2005, 81). Perhaps the most illustrative example of how workers were pushed to their breaking point was the “Drink No Soup” movement that discouraged factory workers from using the restroom during working hours (French 2005, 72).

Unlike the Great Leap Forward that Mao inaugurated at a committee meeting in January of 1958, the Chollima Campaign did not begin as a structured economic plan with a specific strategy. Instead, it was an ideological supplement to the already existing Five-Year [economic] Plan that had begun a year earlier (in 1957) and a label for a process or set of processes that the regime claimed was already taking place. Interestingly, the emergence of the speedy horse in mobilization rhetoric coincided with an announcement in November 1958 by Kim Il Sung to complete the Five-Year Plan a year and a half ahead of schedule. However unrealistic that may have been, the purpose of that announcement was both to bring about a sense of urgency to the task of mobilizing workers and pull them deeper into the grasp of the tentacles of the regime.

Excavation and Systematic Reproduction: The Genealogy of the Horse
One of the central characteristics of Neo-traditionalism is its amalgam of traditional and modern forms, or in this case, the harnessing of an element of the past in order to meet the objectives of the present. We may never know who came up with the idea to incorporate a creature from Chinese mythology into a mobilization campaign and under what precise conditions. What we do know however, is that Kim Il Sung needed to reestablish his legitimacy and the horse was perfectly suited for this task because not only was it a part of the past still preserved in the minds of
North Koreans but it also embodied themes of invincibility and rapid progress that the regime was already advocating at the time of its inception.

In August of 1960, Kim Il Sung gave a speech commemorating model workers, whom he called “Riders of the Chollima.” Following that speech, as if on cue, the North Korean press was suffused with references to these Chollima Riders. While at certain periods of North Korean history, the names of Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il could be found in practically every headline and paragraph, in this era, it was “Chollima,” “Chollima,” and more “Chollima.” For instance, from a newsletter for educators, Kyowon sinmun, some headlines between the dates of August 22 and 31 were “The Chollima Riders are the Heroes of the Era and the Red Warriors of the Party,” “All over the country, squads of Chollima Workteams Compete with the West,” “The Communist of the Chollima Age” and “Let’s continue to expand the ranks of the Chollima teaching masses.” In short, the workers became the superstars.

Literature and art during the Chollima period echoed the values of invincibility, rapid progress, and the attainment of higher stages that the party was trying to instill in its workers. A four-act play called Chollima written by O Chol-su (1961, 69-92) ends with the Great Leader shouting to railroad workers, “Let’s race ahead not on the Thousand Li Horse but the Ten-thousand Li Horse!” A song Chollima chin’gun’ga (Chollima March) by Pak Myong-do (1961, 85) takes this practice of rhetorical acceleration a step even further. The song urges the listener to help arouse a thunderstorm, use the lighting as a whip, and dart forward at a distance in li of o’ongman (億萬). This compound number literally translates into “one-hundred million ten-thousand” and would probably come close to the English nonsense words “zillion” or “gazillion.” The purpose of using this outrageous number in the march was to compel workers to make progress beyond their wildest dreams. Whether this march was actually effective in stimulating worker confidence and initiative is any one’s guess, but Kim Il Sung certainly seemed to think that it was. In a speech chastising artists, he claimed that this march deeply motivated workers and said it should be a model for musical composition (Kim Il Sung 1983, 588).

The most likely model for the Thousand Li Horse was the Red Hare Horse (赤兔馬) from the 14th century Chinese novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Red Hare is red because of his connection to a breed of horses known as “blood-sweating thousand-li horses” (汗血千里馬) believed to be descended from the superior stock of horses from Central Asia (de Crespiigny 2007, 189). When emperor Wudi of Han forcibly obtained a large of number of these steeds from Mongolia in about 100 BCE, he considered them heavenly horses (天馬). In the following two passages, one can see the similarity between the North Korean version of the Thousand Li [Flying] Horse and the description of Red Hare Horse in the Romance of the Three

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6 Because of the association of these horses with the sky and the heavens, some Chinese artwork has portrayed them as winged horses although this is by no means the standard visual representation of the Thousand Li Horse.
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Kingdoms:

Mark ye, the steed swift and tireless, see the dust, spurned by his hoofs, rising in clouds;
Now he swims the river, anon climbs the hill, rending the purple mist asunder;
Scornful he breaks the rein, shakes from his head the jeweled bridle
He is as a fiery dragon descending from the highest heaven

Sanguo 三國 Romance of the Three Kingdoms, 1300s CE
(Brewitt-Taylor trans. 1925, 31)

Clearing the way past great mountains and rivers
Surging waves and thunderstorms bow down before it
The Chollima of the Worker's Party
Like a gust of wind, dashes onwards towards unification

Hurrah! We are the Chollima riders
Galloping off to Communist Paradise

Ch’ollima Haengjin’gok Chollima March
(Kim Yong-ch’ol 1961, 85)

From the imagery “fiery dragon descending from the highest heaven” in the former and “Surging waves and thunderstorms bow down before it” in the latter, we can see how both portrayals of the horse expand into the realm of the supernatural. Accordingly, in the North Korean version, this realm of the supernatural is aligned very closely with the nationalist theme of unification of the peninsula.

A second possible linkage to Red Hare Horse is the fact that a recurring color throughout the Chollima Campaign was red. A march proclaiming the red of the iron smelting furnaces and cast iron shining across the world (Pak Myōng-do 1961, 85), news articles and Kim Il Sung speeches identifying Chollima Riders as “Red Warriors,” and poems depicting Kim Il Sung planting red seeds (Chǒng Sŏ-ch’ŏn 1961, 23-24) are but a few examples. Not only was the color red in continuity with Red Hare Horse and the blood-sweating horses of ancient China, conveniently it also was the color of communism.

There are historical as well as literary reasons to believe that Romance of the Three Kingdoms was indeed a major influence. Researcher Hyuk-chan Kwon, in his chronicling of the popularity of Romance of the Three Kingdoms inside Korea, has demonstrated the relevance of the work to 20th century Koreans. Specifically, he reveals that Romance of the Three Kingdoms was one of the few works during the Japanese colonial period that survived the “downfall of classical stories,” was the second most published novel, was likely read by members of all social classes, and was even the first Chinese historical novel to be serialized in a major newspaper (Kwon Hyuk-chan 2010). Although Red Hare Horse was not the main thematic element or character in Romance of the Three Kingdoms, there must have at least been some familiarity with him, both on the part of the producers and the consumers of the North Korean version of the Chollima myth.

When examining just how much continuity this North Korean version of
the horse had with the “Thousand Li Horse” 千里馬 in general rather than the worthy steed Red Hare Horse specifically, we can find a plethora of early references to the “Thousand Li Horse” in several philosophical works from 300s BCE to 0 CE China. At this time, like North Korean ideological texts, the Chollima was used as an instrument of rhetoric. In these premodern Chinese texts, the Thousand Li Horse is employed to illuminate principles of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and wartime planning in short anecdotes with a moral or strategic message. Central to the Thousand Li Horse tradition is the character Bo Le 伯樂, the great judger of horses. Bo Le, as a judger of horses, was actually a subject to a lord himself, but his skill of recognizing the right horses embodied the ability of an effective ruler to realize the good qualities of his subjects and put them to use. The name of the horse usually associated with Bo Le and the ability to travel a thousand 里 is Ji , but the term “Thousand Li Horse” could refer to any horse designated as superior.

A text that mentions both Bo Le and Ji is a collection of short stories called Shuoyuan (Garden of Stories) compiled by a Confucian scholar from 79 to 8 BCE. One passage from this text ends with the line “The reason why the horse Ji did not arrive at a thousand 里 on his own is because he awaited Bo Le and only then arrived” (Rouzer 2007, 373). This quotation follows a story of a master who is distressed about the loss of his most trusted retainer. It is meant to encourage those who have lost a worthy retainer to seek out and cultivate a new one. By portraying the horse Ji as powerless when he is not recognized by his master, this passage stresses the role of the horse judger (or master) to bring out the best in the horse (or subject) and thus downplays the magical powers the horse has on its own.

While the North Korean regime emphasized the horse’s supernatural qualities of incredible speed and invincibility, these Chinese texts emphasize its limits. In an anecdote from Zhanguoce (Strategies of the Warring States), a military advisor uses the Thousand Li Horse character to remind his king of the importance of appropriate timing when approaching an adversary: “The stallion Ji when tired can be beaten by a fresh nag. It is not that the nag [is] better than the stallion; simply that [its] strength is whole … [it] began later than [its] opponents and had the security of being fresh” (Crump 1996, 203). From the same text, there is another anecdote that, instead of referring to a Thousand Li Horse that is too tired, alludes to a Thousand Li Horse that is too old. It presents a man rejecting a position he believes he is too old for, stating to his lord “I have heard that in his prime, the stallion [Ji] could gallop a thousand 里 in day. But in his declining years the worst nag could outrun him” (Crump 1996, 505).

Of the didactic body of work from the 300 BCE to 0 CE periods, I could only find one case where there are any allusions to the mythical qualities of the Thousand Li Horse. At the end of an anecdote from Strategies of the Warring States the Thousand Li Horse, delighted at the finding of a master (Bo Le) that appreciates his noble qualities, lowers its head, then raises it and neighs “with a sound that carried to the heavens—a sound as pure as chiming stones” (Crump 1996, 505). Yet even here with the figurative, poetic language of the sound of the horse, it is the master (not the horse) that initiates this performance by comforting the horse and
recognizing its true potential.\(^7\)

As prevalent as this Thousand Li Flying Horse was in these works of Chinese Classical literature, due to several thematic distinctions, it was likely not a major influence for the flying, leaping, hole-piercing horse of North Korea. Rather than compel the listener to pierce through the realm of delusion and see things for how they really were, the discourse of the North Korean Chollima Campaign emphasized blind faith in the unstoppable race towards progress and the lowering of the celestial realm of the impossible to meet the confines of the present-day. Furthermore, instead of stressing the filial relationship between the master and subject and the mutual responsibilities each had towards one other, the North Korean Chollima propaganda inverted that relationship, making the horse and the unrestrained vigor it represented appear as the master.

Still, as we shall see in the next section, despite the rhetoric of invincibility and heroism from the propaganda of the Chollima Campaign, the actual social relationship being advocated was in fact very similar to the hierarchal relationship of the classical Thousand Li Horse to his master: Bo Le, the judger of horses. There was, after all, only one path being advocated and one leader to guide its direction. For this reason, the Chinese Classical Thousand Li Flying Horse with its emphasis on the master/subject relationship may share more in common with the North Korean Thousand Li Horse than one initially might imagine.

The Framing of Tradition or Traditional Forms of Authority as Progressive or Modern

For the people of North Korea and the regime, the “Thousand Li Horse” was more than just an allusion to the mythology of the past; it was the symbol of a modernity that was in the process of materializing. Thus, at the same time the regime was traditionalizing a speedy, worthy horse, it was using the discourse of modernization to rationalize the forcing of compliance with its agenda. Although the following proclamation is from a speech years after the Chollima Campaign, it reflects the appeals for modernization and industrialization the regime was presenting at the time of the movement:

> Without launching the Chollima Workteam Movement as vigorously as we did, we could not have built Pyongyang, our magnificent democratic capital, or many other cities, large and small, we have today; we would not have been able to construct thousands of factories and enterprises equipped with modern technology or develop an advanced socialist agriculture, thus laying the solid foundations of an independent national economy. In other words, we

\(^7\) Interestingly, the description from this passage of the horse lowering its head and neighing to the heavens resembles the foundation myth of the 53 BCE to 935 CE Korean Silla Kingdom. In both the foundation myth from Korea and the *Strategies of the Warring States* anecdote from China, the horse bows down and gives a resounding neigh up to the heavens. Yet, in the Korean case, the horse is white and flies upwards to the heavens. Although this flying white horse is not called the Thousand Li Horse, it appears to be the model for certain visual representations of the North Korean Chollima, including the Winged Chollima Statue in Pyongyang.
Two poems from the Chollima era, “Footprints” by Kim Pyŏng-du and “The Woman Loved by her Fatherland” by O Yŏng-jae further echo the call to bring forth the modern age of paradise. The former romanticizes the great transformation of rural society by vividly describing the process of change from a stepping stone bridge initially to a wooden bridge and ultimately to a concrete one. The latter portrays a female farmer planting sixteen acres of rice paddy all by herself and forecasts the imminent day when all of this labor performed by her beautiful hands would be done by machines (Kim Chae-yŏng 2000, 182-83). Together these poems illustrate the move by the regime to target desires for modernization and move them towards loyalty to state policy.

In order for this modernization to take place and to function (especially with a lack of capital investment), there was a demand for a wide segment of the population to engage in high-risk, labor intensive industrial and agricultural work for quite some time. Cheehyong Kim has written extensively about the literature during the Chollima Campaign and has used the term “the ideology of repetition” to describe the glorification of the menial, repetitive labor-intensive tasks which workers had to undertake. He interprets this “ideology of repetition” as the key mechanism for how the regime masked social relations in its simultaneous accumulation of both capital and state power. In his words:

For hegemony to take on social importance based on experience, [it] had to appear as the most ordinary setting of human life…. Where else but in everyday life that a monotonous, repetitive activity converges with the abstract notion of patriotism? … [A] young worker is praised by Kim Il Sung because of his ability to be productive day in and day out: he is a patriot because he repeats. Repetition is exactly how the mundanity of everyday life becomes extraordinary (Kim Cheehyung 2010, 156-57).

Another aspect of the “ideology of repetition,” which Cheehyong Kim does not talk about, is the constant and systematic reproduction of references to the Chollima Riders in print, first in newspapers in the second half of 1960 and then in literary texts at the end of 1960 and in the following year. State-initiated Chollima literature with references to flying, leaping, and performing miracles became routine, making the strenuous daily lives of workers appear liberating.

Pushing the people to perform grueling tasks was not the only function of the Chollima propaganda; it also served to purge foreign elements from North Korean ideology and art and individuals that presented a challenge to the leadership. The resounding appeal that the workers, emboldened by the spirit of the Thousand Li Flying Horse, should be the masters coincided with ongoing purges against political factions. In his first speeches that include the rhetorical appeal of the Chollima, Kim Il Sung makes it very clear what his true intentions were. In a speech from late November 1958, he says “We are now moving forward at the speed of Chollima,
but old things are holding us back … We are eager to make progress every day and every hour, but conservatives … and passive elements are trying to dampen our enthusiasm and spirit” (Kim Il Sung 1982, 508). In another speech called “Against Passivism and Conservatism,” Kim Il Sung claims that “conservatives … attempt to paralyse the creative initiative of the working people by holding up the norms of others” (specifically referring to Europe and the Soviet Union) (Kim Il Sung 1982, 448).

Since the Chollima embodied the concept of progress so effectively, Kim Il Sung could use the appeal of the Thousand Li Horse to frame his own personal approach to industrialization as progressive and every other approach or option as conservative or backwards. As scholar Sung Chull Kim points out, the “conservatives” Kim was referring to in these 1958 Chollima speeches were the engineers and technicians who before the Chollima Campaign had little role in party politics. Kim Il Sung associates these individuals with poor productivity and calls them “prisoners of mysticism” because of their belief in the divine powers of science and technology. The cure for their illness of poor productivity and obsession with machinery was to go out among the workers and learn directly from them (Kim Sung Chull 2006, 172-74). This reeducation campaign of intellectuals not only included technicians but also writers and artists. Kim Il Sung demanded that “Writers and artists … go to factories and farm villages to learn from the working people their boundless loyalty to the Party and the resolution and their indomitable revolutionary spirits” (Kim Il Sung 1982, 479).

One account (or rather testimonial) from an artist who actually did go out to the countryside and learn from the masses is “Ch’ôllima kisu tûl kwa hamkke” (Together with the Chollima Riders) by Pyôn Hûl-gûn (1959, 139). This writing reads like a self-criticism and shows how the Chollima Campaign functioned as
a way to assure allegiance to party policy. The artist starts by congratulating the Chollima Riders of the fertilizer industry and naming their accomplishments. He goes on to state that thanks to the Chollima Riders, miraculous events are taking place, they are “knocking down old lives at every single moment, creating new lives, new people, and new personalities” and are “as valuable as gold nuggets, offering an infinite amount of subject matter for art work.” Then he talks about his own reeducation process of learning from the masses and subsequent realization of the importance of documenting the accomplishments of the Riders of the Chollima in artwork. Finally, he states his goal in the New Year, to completely dedicate his efforts towards creating a body of work in honor of his teachers, the Riders of the Chollima.

In the following excerpt, we can see how this artist immersed not only his body but his entire intellect into the productive spirit of the Chollima:

I am caught in the impulse of wanting to write about the most proud and valuable people—the riders of the Chollima that are right beside me. Now I am so happy I don't know what to do. However, my skills as an artist are still not adequate enough to be part of the literary establishment. Therefore, in the new year, I resolve to make an effort to improve my artistic ability. As I immerse my body deeply in the present state of conditions and put my energies into improving my artistic ability, I will carry out the task of a five year creative plan.

Together with the Riders of the Chollima.
Pyön Huí-gún, 1959

Another way the regime used the discourse of “progress” and “the new” to positively frame behaviors that were in fact compulsory was through the forms of social organization that the Chollima Campaign introduced. The Chollima Workteam, for instance, was an evaluation system bestowing titles of Chollima Workteam to groups of workers who attained high production targets. After March 1959, when at the same Kangsŏn Steel plant as the December 1956 rally, a worker reportedly led his fellow workers into exceeding their production quota by a great margin, the Chollima Workteam became the dominant mode of labor organization. Like the Chinese factory enterprise that Andrew Walder uses to explicate his notion of Communist Neo-traditionalism, the Chollima Workteam was the basic unit of political organization by which the party used to manage political affairs efficiently and block other kinds of political associations from springing up. By promoting the Chollima Workteam model so heavily, the regime succeeded in directing the energies of workers away from griping about issues such as proper compensation and work hours and towards competing against each other for social recognition.

Two other units of political organization at this time were the Chongsan-ri method and the Taean System. Following Kim Il Sung’s personal visit to a village called Chongsan-ri in February of 1960, the Chongsan-ri method became an analogue to the Maoist Mass Line and involved members of the party committees assuming the management positions of farms and thus carrying out ideological work face-to-face with the workers. While the Chongsan-ri method system
dominated the countryside, in the factories, the regime instituted the Taean system, where party committee members took a supervisory role higher than the plant managers in factories and ideally made work decisions collectively with the workers (Kim Ilgyu 1975, 71).

What added to the appeal and efficacy of these new forms of social organization was the fact that they did not necessarily limit their reinforcement to mere ideological incentives. One central part of the Chongsang-ri method was the “independent accounting system” that allowed workers to keep the extra profits after meeting the quota. In addition to receiving honorary titles, they were now eligible for prizes and even paid vacations (Kim Ilgyu 1975, 83). The fact that North Korea resorted to these material incentives demonstrates that it saw expanding domestic production as a more essential goal than strict conformance to communist principles. Furthermore, this practice relates to what Andrew Walder calls “organized dependence” or “the extent to which … workers are dependent economically on their enterprises, politically on the party and management, and personally on supervisors” (Walder 1998, 13). For these new forms of social organization, where party officials assumed management positions of farms and factories and used material as well as ideological incentives to control workers, loyalty to workplace bosses and the party became virtually synonymous.

By dominating the fields of art and literature with a single message of socialist modernization and enforcing that message through established institutions, the Chollima Campaign was careful, clear, and deliberate. In contrast to Chinese premodern texts that subordinated the power of the horse to the wisdom of a larger teaching, the Chollima Campaign propaganda focused far more on the unrestrained energy of the horse. Workers enlivened by the spirit of this horse were more than just labor heroes; they were within certain parameters masters of their own destinies. Nevertheless, even as it glorified the masses and portrayed their struggle as liberating, the Chollima Campaign reinforced a sense of dependence on the ruler and on party policy. Therefore, the question remains: if the masses were the masters, why was Kim Il Sung held in such high esteem and accorded so much power and privilege?

The poem “Ch’ongsalli esŏ” by Ch’ŏng Sŏ-ch’ŏn (1961, 23-24) may provide some insight as to how the incredible productive capacity of workers (in this case, farmers) coexisted with the personality cult of Kim Il Sung. The poem portrays Kim coming down to the Ch’ongsan countryside (just outside Pyongyang) and exercising power over the farmland there just by gazing at it. Cornstalks bow down before him, the entire farmland is alive in song, and the red seeds he drops bear fruit in all seasons. By claiming that the people who cherish these seeds from the leader are able to grow wings and fly, the poem simultaneously emboldens the workers and places them in a subservient relationship with their leader. In other words: absolutely anything is possible as long as it is under the direction and guidance of the Great Leader.

Cementing the Tradition: Putting the Legacy of the Chollima into Stone
A visual representation of the regime’s efforts to extend the longevity of the
Chollima can be found on the January 1961 edition of the children's literature magazine called *Adong munhak*. On the front cover, holding a flag that says “Model Brigade” and “Always Prepared” is a young boy riding a white winged horse, and on the back cover, with a collection of books in his lap, is another boy riding a black winged horse as it flies across the sky.

The regime took a particular interest in the medium of children's literature as a mechanism for blurring the distinction between what was impossible and what was not in the Chollima age. One nursery rhyme published in the children's literature journal *Adong munhak* turns a popular Korean idiom on its head. The idiom “Plucking a star from the sky” normally conveys an impossible or improbable outcome, but this rhyme “Hanul-ui pyöldür-a modu naeryöra” (Stars from the sky, all fall down!) makes the whole process of collecting stars not only achievable but instantaneous (Paek Ha 1961, 85). The rhyme features a child identifying with stars, which symbolize the spirit of the Chollima model workers, and asking those stars to fall down on his father's Chollima workteam competition graph. By presenting the possibility of stars coming down to the earth, this rhyme portrays the realm of impossibility as completely tangible.

“Ch’ollima sae ach’im” (Chollima, New Morning) is another piece of children's literature exhibiting themes of impossibility and soaring to new heights (Cho Pyŏg-am 1961, 30-32). It begins with a dialogue between a young boy and his mother, in which the young boy asks his mother why his father's eyebrows have not grayed and his mother replies, “When it comes to people who ride the Chollima, their eyebrows never turn gray.” Later, the boy draws a picture of a horse with its mane and tail soaring upwards, thus exemplifying the magnetic pull of the Chollima upwards towards the sky. He then hangs up the completed picture next to photographs of his sister and Kim Il Sung, proclaiming “It's my horse! The
Chollima, I shall ride!” By orienting the aspirations of North Korean youngsters towards the illustrious Chollima Riders, the regime meant to inspire a new generation of North Koreans to take up the reins of the Flying Horse in the coming age.

In the same year, the regime erected the fourteen-meter-high Chollima statue. Sitting atop this winged horse is a woman holding a sheaf of rice and a man displaying prominently, not a device of farm labor, but a book. The decision to associate the book with the magnificent power of the Chollima could demonstrate the productive role of the writer and artist in promoting worker confidence and reinforces an early decision of the regime to add the writing brush to the familiar hammer and sickle iconography of communism (Armstrong 2003, 111). From the lens of Neo-traditionalism, however, the book not only represents the intellectual role of the writer in stimulating worker productivity but also the restrictive ideological parameters in which he was to produce his work.

The Chollima statue, the inclusion of the Chollima Campaign, Chongsan-ri method and Taean System in the 1972 constitution, and the entire art and literary worker mobilization effort to document the Chollima Movement in its later stages all show how the regime congealed the Chollima experience in order to extend its resonance. Because a political movement that incorporates an element from the past can only last so long on its own, there is a need to freeze it in time and to keep it in the minds of the public for as long as possible. In this way, the fragment of the past ceases to be a distant tradition and instead becomes a new tradition of the modern age.
Conclusion
The essence for a Neo-traditionalist reading of the Chollima Campaign stems from its fusing of traditional and modern themes to rationalize the ongoing accumulation of power in the hands of one individual. The success in securing and maintaining the hegemony of Kim Il Sung was in no small part due to the way the North Korean regime *remythologized* a demythologized horse of the past to suit the goals of the present. By incorporating the race of the Thousand Li Horse into its quest to document, showcase, and glorify model workers, the North Korean regime simultaneously inspired laborers to work harder and created rigorous, sky-high standards for what was expected of them. Furthermore, the motif of the flying, leaping horse allowed Kim Il Sung to rationalize his purges against those who did not support his political agenda. By framing his policies as progressive and their policies as a wall blocking the incredible capacity of the workers, he could send whomever he wanted as far as wanted them to go to supposedly learn directly from the working population.

With its purported goal of industrialization and actual goal of regime consolidation, the Chollima Campaign was in continuity with a number of Stalinist and Maoist practices. These practices include the glorification of model workers and the enforced bond between the party and the working population. Yet with its fervent nationalist agenda for self-sufficiency and heavy emphasis on the cultural and political realm as the engine for economic growth, the Chollima Campaign would prove to have a different fate. At the same time state centralization projects such as mass mobilization campaigns and the cult of personality were declining in the Soviet Union and proving disastrous in China, they were enhancing the legitimacy of the North Korean regime during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

A decade before China opened up trade to the West and at the height of the Great Chinese Famine, North Korea had largely achieved agricultural self-sufficiency and had increased its trade with the West as a percentage of its total international trade from 0 to 40% (French 2005, 79-80). The double digit growth that North Korea experienced annually at the time was certainly a stark contrast to other Asian countries, particularly the poverty-stricken and politically turbulent South Korea. One French newspaper, *Le Monde*, even reported in the early 1960s that North Korea was “one of the greatest economic powers in Asia” (McEachern 2010, 58). The North Korean regime was so emboldened by the international respect it believed it had acquired that in the decades following the Chollima Campaign, it would even seek to export its model of post-colonial development to the Third World (Armstrong 2009, 5).

The Chollima Campaign was primarily ideological and functioned as a streamlining effort to bring the desires of North Korean workers for a better life in line with the desire of the regime for state control and centralization. It was only economic in the sense that it sought to make up for a lack of necessary investment for its Five-Year Plan by increasing the productive capacity of its workers. Instead of relying on specific economic projects like China did during the Great Leap Forward, North Korea experimented with a variety of Soviet, Chinese, and indigenous models of economic development, and was only consistent in its
reliance on the sheer human capital of the backs of its workers. By saturating the
collective consciousness with the ancient archetype of a precious, speedy horse and
making that horse a central feature of daily life, the Chollima Movement was an
“invented tradition” in every sense of the phrase.

GLOSSARY

Bo Le 伯樂
Chollima (Ch’ollima) 千里馬
Ch’ollima Undong 千里馬 運動
Chongsan-ri (Ch’ongsalli) 靑山里
Ji 驥
dongman 億萬
Pyongyang (P’yongyang) 平壤
Shuoyuan 說苑
Sanguo 三國
Zhanguoce 戰國策

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