733A27 Master Thesis in European and International Affairs

The Modern International Theatre State

North Korea’s statehood, hereditary successions and its place in the international society

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## Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTBTO</td>
<td>Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPRK</td>
<td>Democratic People’s Republic of Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>FALSG</td>
<td>Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group of the Communist Party of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>GNP</td>
<td>Gross National Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEU</td>
<td>Highly Enriched Uranium</td>
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<tr>
<td>KCNA</td>
<td>Korean Central News Agency of the DPRK</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROK</td>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<td>USSR</td>
<td>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics</td>
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### Genealogy of Political Leadership in North Korea, 1948 - 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Appellations</th>
<th>In Office</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kim Il-sung. 김일성</strong>&lt;br&gt;15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; April 1912 – 8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; July 1994</td>
<td><em>Eternal President of the Republic, founder of the DPRK, the “Great Leader”</em></td>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; September 1948 – 8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; July 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kim Jong-il. 김정일 金正日</strong>&lt;br&gt;16&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; February 1941 – 17&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; December 2011</td>
<td><em>Supreme Leader, General Secretary of the Worker’s Party of North Korea, the “Dear Leader”</em></td>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; July 1994 – 17&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; December 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kim Jong-un. 김정은 金正恩</strong>&lt;br&gt;8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; January 1983 or 1984 –</td>
<td><em>Supreme Leader, General Secretary of the Worker’s Party of North Korea, the “Great Successor”</em></td>
<td>17&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; December 2011 –</td>
</tr>
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Abstract

This thesis proposes an extended version of the "theatre state” concept, originally coined by Clifford Geertz, as an alternative analysis of contemporary North Korean statehood and political rule.

The DPRK is perhaps the only revolutionary, state-socialist entity to have survived the end of the Cold War with its original order intact, and to have undergone a hereditary succession of leadership twice, while withstanding remarkably adverse conditions. Today, Kim Jong-un is the third ruler in the Kim-dynasty, leaving the mode of charismatic rule and political imagery that characterise the North Korean regime largely unchanged. North Korea may therefore be the only state, apart from monarchies, to ever have achieved what Max Weber called the “routinization of charisma”.

It is argued in this thesis that this continuity of revolutionary polity and charismatic authority was enabled by a conscious choice of the political elite to turn the DPRK into a type of theatre state – a political state directed towards the performance of ritual and spectacle in order to execute power, rather than the pursuit of more concrete ends such as welfare (cf. Kwon, Chung 2012: 45). Thereby, the charismatic authority of North Korea’s glorified leader Kim Il-sung was de-personalized and turned into a hereditary institution, but without becoming traditional or bureaucratic. This “theatre” was achieved through the mobilization of history, the dramatization of events, and the strategic use of symbols and rites. Cultural productions, the interactions of the leaders with the people and foreign diplomats, the use of global media platforms and photographs of the DPRK are analysed here as the expressions of the North Korean theatre, as well as the basis for the interpretations the Western audience conceives of it.

Further, this thesis aims to show how such a theatre state functions as a discursive linchpin that influences regional distributions of power and contributes to the constitution of hegemonial structures. An international, interdependent perspective is hence added to the theatre state concept, in order to illustrate how “the spectacle” influences both the domestic society and the international “audience”.

In face of the recent events concerning North Korea’s aggressive rhetoric towards its neighbours and the USA, this thesis aims to promote an alternative view of state power as theatrical performance, and to provide an analysis of North Korea’s role in regional and global politics.
1. Introduction

On 12\textsuperscript{th} February 2013, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) conducted an underground nuclear test under direction of its leader Kim Jong-un. This was the third confirmed test in seven years, and apparently the most successful one, according to North Korean state media. The test caused the international community, especially the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) and Japan to raise their military alert status, and an emergency United Nations meeting was summoned. Investigators failed to detect any radiation, but the artificial tremor with its initial magnitude of 5.1 was enough to cause international concern. (cf. CTBTO Press Release 12\textsuperscript{th} February 2013) A few weeks before, in December 2012, the North Korean regime had launched its first satellite. A space programme represented a breach of the UN Security Council Resolutions, and undermined pledges the North Korean regime had made in negotiations with the United States. Testing a nuclear bomb was a much more direct provocation though. The DPRK has uttered several threats of nuclear attacks to the global community before, especially to its neighbour South Korea, and its political antagonist the United States. However, the frequency of aggressive rhetoric and gestures displayed by the regime in 2013 is new.

In his official new year's speech, directed both at the national public and the world beyond North Korean borders, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un spoke of the need to improve the DPRK's economy, as well as its relations to the South Korea, and warned that confrontation would only lead to war. (BBC News 1\textsuperscript{st} January 2013) The international society sensed a certain willingness to promote an opening of the almost hermetically closed of dictatorship, and hoped for a more liberal, open-minded leader in the young Kim, who is at the time of writing estimated to be 29 years of age and rumoured to have been educated in a private school in Switzerland. Kim Jong-un is the third political leader out of the “Kim-dynasty”, son of Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, and grandson of the Eternal President Kim Il-sung. The DPRK is therefore the only revolutionary, state-socialist entity to have undergone a hereditary succession of leadership twice. The international society watched the transition from one Kim to the next, with the tentative hope that the monolithic apparatus of autocratic rule might be weakened. Only three months later, this hope has all but faded, and the world fears to be on the brink of a nuclear war. Kim Jong-un had promised in his new year's address that 2013 would be a year of creations and changes, a year marking a “radical turnabout” that would lift the impoverished DPRK out of its isolation and significantly raise living standards. (ibid.) Choosing war rhetoric and further withdrawing the nation from an outside gaze may not be the way to achieve these goals from the perspective of the international community, but it might very well be from Kim's. The young leader is working hard to establish his legitimacy, and continue in the
tradition of his father and grandfather, who have left him a nuclear programme, an enormous repression apparatus and severe economic troubles as heritage.

North Korea is often treated like a curiosity by the international society, a relic from the Cold War, hanging on to archaic systems and ideas, and fostering a strong disregard for human rights and individual freedoms. The prevalent Western view of North Korea is very much shaped by journalists. Indeed, the Kims, while they can be criticised for many failings, managed to succeed in one respect: they kept the DPRK in the spotlight of the global media. However, substantial knowledge about North Korea was notable mainly in its absence, at least until recently, due to the fact that almost no impulses come out of the so-called “hermit kingdom”, and even less get in. (Armstrong 2011: 357) The mystical appearance of the DPRK raises questions about the nature of its statehood though: What actual characteristics does it display? How has it survived way beyond the collapse of Soviet State-socialism and the market liberalisation in the People's Republic of China (PRC), despite having to deal with the most adverse conditions? What can we really know about the Kimist regime, and the structures of life of every-day North Korean citizens? Where does that knowledge come from and how is it used to create identities?

In the Western academic discourse, the DPRK has mostly been analysed within security studies, as it is seen as an unpredictable, rogue states that commands nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War reality. (cf. Buzo 2002) Another popular tenor is that of interpreting North Korea as the world's last specimen of a Stalinist society. (cf. Lankov 2007) The later approach is not considered fully accurate any longer, as the DPRK indeed had to abandon the Stalinist model of social construction in order to survive. It does remain the quintessential cultural and political “other” though, differing even from other “Communist” states in contemporary international politics.

This thesis proposes an alternative approach to the analysis of North Korean statehood. In 1998, Japanese political analyst Haruki Wada was the first to notice that the North Korean regime displayed certain peculiarities not found in any other comparable type of state – mostly connected to the symbolic character of its leader cult. Wada was reminded of the theatre state concept, coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, but only applied it tentatively to the DPRK. Still, Wada managed to open up new ways of discussing North Korean statehood. (cf. Wada 1998) It is argued in this thesis that the contemporary DPRK indeed displays significant characteristics Geertz identifies as expressions of a “theatre state”. Further, it is argued that the hereditary succession of leadership that took place in North Korea for the second time now (a phenomenon that can be found in no other comparable state type) can be paralleled with the Weberian concept of “routinization of charisma”. Both arguments are theoretically and methodologically connected. It is
assumed here that for the Kimist regime, symbolic practice, signs, theatrics, dramaturgy and spectacle play a far more determining role for the constellation of sovereignty than they do in any other type of contemporary state. The Kims established this type of theatre state in order to secure their own rule, to create a heritage that would outlast even the death of the political leader – the socio-political centre of the nation. This thesis aims to show how “theatre states” – political states directed towards the performance of ritual and spectacle in order to execute power, rather than the pursuit of more concrete ends such as welfare (cf. Kwon, Chung 2012: 45) – function as discursive linchpins that influence both global and regional distributions of power.

1.1 Research questions

This specific set of problems and conditions leads to the following central research question pursued in this thesis:

“How can the hereditary succession of leadership that took place twice now in the contemporary DPRK be explained by the application of the theatre state concept? Further, how does the theatre state concept contribute to an analysis of North Korea’s place within the international society, its foreign policies and its influence on the global and regional distribution of power?”

From this starting point, a set of subsequent questions can be deduced:

- How does the theatre state concept fit contemporary North Korea? How does the concept contribute to the analysis of North Korean statehood and successions of leadership?
- How does a theatre state construct its foreign policy?
- How is the spectacle put on by the DPRK discussed by the outside world in media, academics and foreign policy analysis?
- How does that discussion contribute to a specific diffusion of power? How does a theatre state become a discursive linchpin within its region and in global politics?
- Is the concept of the “international theatre state”, as it is proposed here as a post-structuralist concept, appropriate to discuss the formation of hegemony in the region, or is the more conventional theoretical approach of neorealism better suited?

1.2 Conceptual frameworks and definitions

This research topic is based on Max Weber’s argument that social actions are framed and shaped by a general belief held by the members of a society that a legitimate social order exists. The possibility that social behaviour will be directed in terms of that order constitutes the basis for its authority. According to Weber, authority exists within a state, which in turn is to be understood as the monopoly of coercive forces (bureaucracy, police, army, etc.). The most inventive type of
authority, usually born out of a revolution or a similar socio-political rupture, is that of charismatic authority. However, once the society has been stabilized again, authority reconsolidates itself and takes on more fixed structures, in the shape of traditional or bureaucratic authority. In rare cases however, the charismatic authority manages to outlast this process, and the “routinization of charisma” is achieved. (Sukale 2002: 394)

In connection to the Weberian theories of authority and leadership, the other central concept of this thesis is that of the theatre state, which challenges Max Weber's definition of the state. Coined by Clifford Geertz, the concept aims to analyse the pre-colonial Balinese state apparatus. As already stated above, the theatre state is to be understood in political anthropology as a state directed towards the performance of drama and rites by using symbols and myths to execute power. The expression of the theatre state is the spectacle, which manifests itself in rituals, technologies, social formations, arguments, speeches, photographs, maps and cultural productions. (cf. Medlicott 2005)

Categorizing a certain state as a theatre state does not imply that said state is what is generally referred to as a dictatorship, nor does it describe a democracy – or any type of statehood in between. The theatre state concept is of post-structuralist nature, as it proposes a semiotic theory of culture and a rhetoric-based theory of power. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 45) In the context of this thesis this suggests that the predominant idea of power as material preponderance is countered with an idea of power as performance.

The third element central to the conceptual framework of this thesis is the post-structuralist analysis of the “political media spectacle” by Murray Edelman, who observes the functioning of political news and the media in general. He argues against the conventional interpretation of politics, in which it is taken for granted that we live in a world of facts to which people react rationally. (cf. Edelman 1988) Edelman's work is essential as an overarching, but at the same time integral part to this thesis, as it functions within the same realms of post-structuralism as the theatre state concept, and enables the expansion of the same and its adaptation to contemporary realities of international politics. The “political media spectacle” is used as an extending category to analyse the effects of the North Korean theatre state – both inside the DPRK and around it.

The fourth conceptual cornerstone in this thesis is that of hegemony. Hegemony is commonly defined as a specific type of rule based on the ability of a state to define its own interests as relevant and beneficial to most other members of the international society. Neorealism defines hegemony as material (meaning military) preponderance. (Prys 2010: 488) In accordance with the theatre state concept applied to the national and international level, a post-structuralist approach to analysing the consolidation of hegemony on a regional and global level shall be proposed. This alternative way of analysing the specific diffusion of power in the region is chosen to explain certain profound singularities that the normally used neorealist theory struggles to elucidate.
The chosen angle in this thesis is to verify hypotheses, by postulating connections between the concepts listed above. The basic hypothesis in this thesis is the assumption that the concept of the theatre state after Clifford Geertz is expandable and can be applied to contemporary North Korea. This assumption is based on the research of Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung that reads the theatre state as an extension of Max Weber's theories of authority and state power. (cf. 2012)

The North Korean regime has turned itself into the only “Communist” leadership in history to have undergone hereditary succession twice. It is assumed in this thesis that this linear continuity normally only found in monarchies was enabled by the national theatre the Kimists created. By employing symbols, myths and rituals, as well as through the dramatization of events, the regime achieved what Max Weber called the “routinization of charisma”. The individual charisma of the deceased North Korean leaders, especially Kim Il-sung's, is still alive within the society. It has become a collective entity passed on to the North Korean people in general, and his biological descendants in particular.

Further, it is assumed that the concept of the theatre state isn't only restricted to the national level, but is operative on the international level as well. The use of symbols and rhetoric resonates within the national society, outside of it, and beyond it.

The DPRK, despite being labelled a “hermit kingdom”, consciously creates a global spectacle, and needs to do so in order to produce its sovereignty. The DPRK struggles since the division of the Korean peninsula with its own self-perception and identity. In order to stabilize its internal structure and justify its existence, it puts on a theatre, for which it needs the international community to function as spectators. Only with an attentive audience, the theatre performance can come full circle. Regardless of its reclusiveness, the North Korean regime has a very clear idea of how it wants to interact with the world and how it wants to be perceived by it. It is assumed that the “international theatre state” influences the diffusion of power and the constitution of hegemony, both on a global and regional level.

1.4 Current state of research and applied material

The theatre state concept stems from political anthropology. For anthropologists, doing research requires long, personal immersions into the society that is the focus of analysis. This established way of anthropologist practice cannot be applied to North Korea, however. The DPRK is one of the most sheltered and guarded societies in the contemporary world. “It is also intensely proud and invests heavily in preventing outsiders from seeing anything that might make a negative impression.” (Kwon, Chung 2012: 9) All visitors allowed into the country are taken on guided, highly
choreographed tours, to make sure they only see what the regime wants them to see. Contact with “regular” North Koreans is prohibited. This is quite discouraging for analysts, including the author of this thesis. However, many accounts about the nature of the DPRK have been written by those who visited the country, and by those who defected from it, providing an alternative basis for analysis. Even a highly controlled society allows one to catch moments of revelation. Herein lays the motivation to find ways to work around North Korea's guarded nature, and to analyse the state and society from different angles.

Mostly, the DPRK has been analysed from the perspective of security studies in respect to its military capabilities. Other studies focus North Korean political culture and society – but in some cases only produce a gloss for existing attitudes many in the West already have about the country. Yet, many studies have proven very helpful for the purpose of this thesis.

The material used here includes academic literature by political and anthropologist researchers, foreign policy documents, Western news reports, North Korean propaganda material and official government statements, speeches by politicians and political satire.

A very central source is North Korea. Beyond Charismatic Politics. (2012) by Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, a recent study on the DPRK's hereditary successions in connection to the theatre state concept. In addition, an article titled Symbol and Sovereignty in North Korea (2005) by Carol Medlicott has proven a helpful source, as it discusses the use of signs and rituals in connection to state formation. Andrei Lankov, professor at Kookmin University in Seoul and journalist, put the experiences he made during various times he spent in the DPRK into a book, North of the DMZ (2007). While this is not a scholarly book per se, and lacks as distinct thesis, it provides great insight into daily life and the effects of the political mode of rule that are essential to the argumentation in this thesis from an anthropologist perspective.

To provide this thesis with a historical and cultural basis, Charles Armstrong's book The North Korean Revolution, 1945 – 1950 (2004) is referred to. Armstrong describes the religious, political and sociocultural heritage of the Korean Peninsula in great detail. Rüdiger Frank, head of the East Asian Studies department at the University of Vienna and adjunct professor at the Korea University and at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, provides several important analyses of the North Korean brand of “Communism”. Further, he is co-founder of the online blog 38north.org that supplies informed analysis of events in and around the DPRK.

Cultural productions, especially in form of pictorial representations, are an essential analytical part of this thesis. Having visited an exhibition of North Korean artworks at the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna in 2010 (the first exhibition of this kind in the Western world), provided an important basis for the author's argumentation. Min-Kyung Yoon wrote a corresponding treatise to said exhibition, titled North Korean Artworks. Historical Painting and the Cult of Personality. (2012),
that proved useful in connection to my original notes. Further, Suk-Young Kim’s *Illusive Utopia* (2010) is an essential work. Kim deals with performing arts in North Korea, especially film and theatre. The study is primary research, and provides a wide reading on cultural expression and identity.

Notably, studies analysing the role of North Korea on an international level are still absent, therefore this thesis aims to provide a global level to the theatre state concept. Relevant to this thesis, in respect to the adding of an international perspective and analysing effects in the diffusions of power, is Miriam Prys’ article *Hegemony, Domination, Detachment: Differences in Regional Powerhood* (2010), that provides a basis for extending the theatre state concept to analysing supranational diffusions of power.

**1.5 Research design and structure**

The central concepts of the “theatre state” by Geertz and the “political media spectacle” by Edelman represent post-structuralist constructs. Both are connected to the interpretive, historical sociology of Max Weber. The contemporary DPRK is used as a specific case to apply and extend both concepts. The use of cultural productions and media to create knowledge and identity, be it by the DPRK itself or the world around it, will be discursively analysed.

This thesis will be structured as following:

The first half will begin with an outline of current academic approaches to defining the political and social system of the DPRK, including the roles Socialism, Stalinism, guerrilla ideology and the *Ch'uche* idea played in the formation of the North Korean nation in Chapter 2. A definition of the political system for the purpose of this thesis will be provided, and the specific singularities of the North Korean regime that cannot be explained by this definition will be highlighted – especially the seeming “routinization of charisma” will be discussed. Then, a synopsis of the theatre state concept after Clifford Geertz will be provided, along with the corresponding views on statehood, society, power and symbols in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, symbols, performances and theatrics in North Korea will be looked into, in form of the meaning of cultural productions. This includes the analysis of pictorial representations, theatre, cinema and mass games, which display an important identity-forming character in the DPRK. Further, the interaction of the Kims with the citizens will be illustrated, to see how masses are mobilized for the “state theatre” in North Korea.

Further, Chapter 4 will treat the “routinization of charisma” between the members of the Kim family, and how it was achieved by creating a national narrative that is tied to their persons by myths, rites and signs. This section is aimed at uncovering the religious traditions and historical
aspects that play into the formation of statehood in North Korea today.

Chapter 5 will look at the “international spectacle”, to illuminate how the DPRK presents itself to the world beyond its borders. This includes the continuous nuclear threats the regime utters to its self-appointed adversaries and the “Axis of Evil” persona that was attested to the DPRK. Further, the use of (social) media platforms like Twitter and Youtube by the North Korean government will be analysed, as well as the portrayal of North Korea in satellite images on Google Maps.

The second part of the thesis begins with Chapter 6, in which the interpretation of the North Korean theatre by the international audience, in form of foreign policies, dominant discourse and media will be analysed. A comparison between a neorealist and a post-structuralist approach will be offered, to provide an alternative analysis to the diffusion of power in the region. The portrayal of North Korea, its foreign policies and culture in Western media will be analysed for this purpose.

In Chapter 6, North Korea's position between China and South Korea will be identified. This is to determine what role the DPRK plays on the regional level, and how this in turn influences global hegemony.

1.6 Limitations of this study

This thesis represents a case study in a broader sense, which implies the in-depth empirical investigation of a specific phenomenon, focusing on context, complexity and difference found in a clearly defined social reality, in order to explore the configurations of superordinate structures and manifestations. (Vennesson 2008: 226) The type of case study chosen here is to demonstrate connections and causalities in a specific, delimited extract of man-made reality (Westle 2009: 99, 103), to produce context-dependent, ideographic knowledge. (cf. della Porta 2008: 210) This study is hence not directly variable-oriented, and isn’t aimed at producing generalized knowledge. Further it needs to be noted that while this is a case study, it is not a comparative one. It could be argued that other contemporary types of statehood can be found that display theatre state characteristics, but none show enough parallels to serve for a profound, reliable comparison within the frames of this thesis. Providing a comparison between two or more countries would be possible, but would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore a contrast between the post-structuralist and neorealist school of thought in respect to the analysis of power diffusion has been chosen instead.

It is further not the aim of this thesis to provide an encompassing prognosis for future developments. Rather, a dissection of the current situation from a post-structuralist perspective shall be provided. The time frame of this analysis stretches from the early 20th century into present day.
This thesis is applying the theatre state concept and analyses its expressions. This implies that the "state" may often times appear to be regarded as a monolith. Institutional pluralism in the DPRK is briefly touched on, but is indeed not a paramount theme. It can be argued that this implies that significant internal power structures aren't sufficiently analysed. However, as already mentioned, the use of the theatre state concept determines power as performative, and hence statehood as the product of a performance. All groups within the state are seen as contributing to the same aims: the reproduction of society and the securing of existing power structures. Due to a lack of information and conflicting sources on the internal structures of the DPRK, its inherent power groups cannot be sufficiently analysed – only the spectacle they put on together can be.

Another major limitation of this thesis is that the author does not read Korean, or any other Asian language. This limits the research material used here, and implies a dominance of Eurocentric views and approaches. The “theatre state” is a concept developed by a Western scholar describing a non-Western society. It is intended to be an alternative approach, but the problem of applying Eurocentric categories still remains, as alternative Asian literature on North Korean statehood and society cannot be accessed. The majority of sources are in English and German, but for the purpose of doing primary research, video clips and songs in Korean language were used as well. The language of the sources in question is stated in footnotes.

1.7 Aspired contributions

In the logic of the Weberian tradition this thesis is searching for limited generalizations about historical divergences, and concrete knowledge about specific processes in a consciously chosen setting. It is based on hypotheses and tries to postulate connections between the theoretical concepts identified as central to the research procedure. This implies that the narrative is used as an instrument of analysis, in order to understand explanation as understanding historical diversity and the singling out of reasons. (della Porta 2008: 203)

On a theoretical level, this thesis is to propose an extension of the theatre state concept, in order to fully apply it to the contemporary DPRK, and to add an international perspective to the concept, so as to analyse the construction of an outside presence and foreign policy. This is to be done within the grand frame of post-structuralist theory, and with the help of the “political media spectacle” theory by Edelman. Further, it is to argue for a view of power as a performative concept, not just mere material capability.
On an empirical level, an alternative analysis of North Korean foreign policy, propaganda and cultural productions shall be provided. This includes the reactions of the global audience, who serve as spectators to the performance. It is to show how media shapes perceptions and identities.

On the political level, this thesis aims to illustrate how the contemporary DPRK serves as a discursive linchpin in the area, a contributor to the diffusions of power and constitution of global and regional hegemony. At the core, this thesis provides an alternative approach to North Korean statehood and foreign policy.
2. North Korean Statehood

2.1 The political and social system of the DPRK

In recent decades, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been much talked about in international media as the subject of foreign policy relations and security matters. The DPRK has been focused more than it perhaps should have been, considering it is but a small, isolated and underdeveloped dictatorship, comparable in size and economic indicators to Mozambique\(^1\). (Lankov 2007: 2) However, there are two factors that contribute to North Korea's continued presence in global political discourse and media coverage. For one, there is the game of nuclear blackmail that P'yŏngyang plays by alternating between a hard line, in form of issuing threats, withdrawing from dialogue and cancelling agreements; and a softer line, by resuming talks at the price of requiring their interlocutors to modify their demands and offer further rewards. By employing this basic negotiation strategy, the DPRK managed to play upon both exaggerated hopes and fears of the international community, generating a politically charged discourse. (Oh, Hassig 2010: 89)

Also, the fact that North Korea has managed to survive against all odds as the world's last die-hard state-socialist regime captures the interest of the international society. It is no secret that the centralized economy of the DPRK is characterized by misallocation and insufficiency, and that problems like famine and malnutrition are to this day a reality for large parts of the North Korean population. Due to the on-going food shortage, North Korea is even referred to as a “failed state” by some. (cf. Frank 2009: 141, Medlicott 2005: 65) These issues, however, seem to do little to weaken the North Korean regime. While the rest of the Communist states either collapsed or had to reconstruct themselves, the DPRK remained a stoic outpost as one of the world's most repressive societies. (cf. Buzo 2002: 172)

In the 2011 *Freedom House* survey concerning the levels of democracy, civil liberties and press freedom in the world, North Korea has once again scored the lowest ratings, as it has since the survey was first conducted over 40 years ago. The country is categorised as a 7, and has been named “the Worst of the Worst”, along with Burma, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tibet. (Freedom House 2011: 19) The *Freedom House* approach has been criticised as too narrow. Yet, these ratings do contribute to the definition of the North Korean regime as one of the most restrictive ones that currently exist.

Questions arise about how the North Korean political system is classified, and how it keeps surviving against all odds. While there is a general consensus among political analysts about the

\(^{1}\)Mozambique GDP per capita 2012: $1,200 [est.], North Korea GDP per capita 2012: $1,800 [est.] (CIA World Factbook 2013)
wider characteristics of the North Korean regime, diverging interpretations persist when it comes to defining the deeper nature of the system. The DPRK is often referred to, as mentioned above, as the world's last real State-socialist – some even call it Stalinist – society. (Lankov 2007: 2) Others call it a hereditary dictatorship, based on an elaborate personality cult around the Kim family. (Buzo 2002: 174) As a result of strict isolation and authoritarian rule, the DPRK is sometimes also labelled a “Hermit Kingdom”. (Mansourov 2007: n.p.) Brian R. Myers even goes as far as characterising North Korea as a far-right national-socialist country, whose political and social self-consciousness was heavily influenced by the Japanese occupation (1910 - 1945). (Myers 2011: 9, 11) Indeed, the establishment of Socialism in North Korea was closely tied to a nationalist movement, which affected its ideology and represents a clear contrast to class-based, orthodox Marxism. (Frank 2009: 148)

Further, the fact that North Korea's nuclear agenda is difficult to interpret doesn't help the matter. It is unclear what kinds of missiles the state possesses, or what exactly it plans on doing with them. The most recent nuclear tests were a provocation of the international society, and the North Korean rhetoric does nothing to conceal the country's aggressive potential. Not all see the missile tests as a real threat to the international order though, as for instance security expert Oliver Thränert stated. (Der Standard, 12th February 2013)

Explanations for the DPRK's persistence as one of the most sanctioned and restricted states in the world run thin. Naturally, a lot of elements have contributed to North Korea's survival – and some are more apparent than others. This lack of insight into the North Korean state makes it difficult to predict the country's agenda, which contributes to the factor of insecurity.

2.1.1 Socialism, Stalinism and Guerrilla Ideology

The establishment of Socialism in East Asia differed significantly from related developments in Eastern Europe. In all societies that are based on state-controlled resource allocation, economic and political evolutions are closely connected, and the DPRK was no exception. Similarities to the development of other revolutionary, socialist societies can be found, both in Asia and Europe. However, the context matters. This applies to specific historic and cultural aspects that are hard to grasp, and differences in structures and resource configuration. (Frank 2009: 142) The way the political regime of the DPRK was consolidated may not have been unique, but the fact that it has endured way beyond the end of the Cold War is.

On its own original web page\(^2\), the DPRK describes itself as “an independent socialist state representing the interests of all the Korean people.”, and the government and socialist society of the

\(^2\)http://www.korea-dpr.com/
Republic as “a people-centred social system in which the masses of the working people are the masters of everything and everything in the society serves them. In accordance with the nature of its socialist system, the Government of the Republic defends and protects the interests of workers, peasants and intellectuals and all other working people who have become masters of state and society, free from exploitation and oppression.” (DPRK Official Website 2011)

This self-description broadly reflects a Marxist-Leninist tenor to the outside world, but this impression of contemporary North Korea is considered misleading. In 1972, the country replaced Marxism-Leninism as the official state ideology by the Chuch‘e idea, the political manifest of Kim Il-sung – the country's first leader who was installed by the USSR in 1948, and soon after declared himself the founder of the DPRK. Chuch‘e, developed in the 1960ies, reflects the idea of the self-reliance of the Korean people as determining the country's development. It consists of policies of extreme military mobilization and isolationism. “Self-reliance” stands for the principle that the individual is the master of everything and decides everything, as long as he or she acts within the collective. The ideology has strong roots in Korean nationalism, but also in the fundamental differences of policy and perspective on the unification of the Korean peninsula between the DPRK and its allies. It represents a split from both the PRC and the USSR. (Buzo 2002: 93) The Chuch‘e concept does have parallels to classical Communist ideas, as it, for instance, builds on the Marxist concept of “the subject”. (Myers 2011: 44-48) At the same time however it negates the fundamental, orthodox Marxist idea of the objectivity of historical processes, which implies that the individual is directed by historical laws. (Frank 2009: 153) Chuch‘e, in its culture-specific, ethnic nationalism, allows the regime to continue to speak of Socialism, while at the same time pursuing antithetic policies.

Kim Il-sung based his leadership style on his experiences in the Manchurian guerrilla war during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. This provided him with ideological guidance and a source for homilies on the need for perseverance, loyalty and discipline. The military component and the guerrilla outlook of the elite are to this day conveyed in schools, through mass media, art, literature and music. State apparatuses are pressed into service to produce a new, highly militarized “Chuch‘e-type citizen”, who is supposed to have “arms in one hand and a hammer and sickle in the other”. (Buzo 2002: 98) The guerrilla aspect led to a definition of the DPRK as a “partisan state”. This categorisation draws attention to the groups of political actors who played a central role in the foundation of North Korea: the vigorous power struggle between the different political fractions during the time after the Second World War included the Kimists, the nationalists and the Communists who wanted to follow the example set by the Soviet Union and the PRC, and concluded only in the 1970ies. Kim Il-sung managed to keep the idea that the country was still in the midst of a guerrilla war alive, by continuously portraying Japan, the USA and South Korea as
hostile powers. Thereby he mobilized the military, one of the largest factions in the country, and in effect the nationalists. The orthodox Marxists were strategically ousted, which left Kim Il-sung's so called Manchurian partisans the unchallenged, singular political force in North Korea. The anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles of the “partisans” turned into the nation’s single, all-encompassing and most important historical narrative that works into the present. (Wada 1992: 377; Kwon, Chung 2012: 16)

In order to provide himself with more practical guidance for building an industrialized socialist state, Kim Il-sung turned to the Stalinist model of social construction, which served him with a specific choice of political imagery, propaganda methods and precise laudatory titles bestowed on “the Great Leader”, as he started to call himself. Between 1955 and 1994, North Korea was regarded as the world's most perfect specimen of a Stalinist society. (Lankov 2007: 2; Buzo 2002: 96-101) As an aftermath of the great famine between 1994 and 1998, Kim Il-sung's son and successor, Kim Jong-il, adopted the Sŏn'gun “military first” policy, to strengthen the country and government by further investing money into the armed forces. In this context, all official references to Communism were systematically removed from the constitution and all other official documents by 2009. Labelling the DPRK as a Communist country per se is hence considered incorrect. (cf. Frank 2009: 154, 155)

While the country cannot be defined as a Communist state, the characteristics of the regime outlined above suggest that the contemporary DPRK displays a totalitarian system. Based on the Weberian definition of the state as the monopoly of coercive forces, Carl Joachim Friedrich defined six structure characteristics to identify totalitarian regimes (1957: 19):

• The dominance of an ideology that proclaims the radical, final state of a society
• One-Party-Rule
• A terrorist secret police
• The news monopoly of the state
• The arms monopoly of the state
• A centralized economy

These characteristics broadly apply to today's DPRK. To this day the country displays restrictive social structures and a centrally controlled economy, despite a very tentative opening in the past decade. The militarization of civilians and their every-day lives, the competition between administrative units for power and the authority of the party elite are classic attributes of State-socialist, totalitarian societies. Numerous prison-labour camps are known to exist, which are in the living conditions and treatment of its inmates nothing short of Soviet Gulags or concentration
camps. The inertia of police surveillance, media control and the general fear of terror help the regime carry on under the most adverse circumstances. (cf. Oh, Hassig 2010: 93)

Within the frameworks of this thesis, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will therefore be defined as a hereditary, state-socialist dictatorship – a totalitarian partisan state characterised by revolutionary authority and a culture-specific, ethnic nationalism. The core element of the regime is the charisma of the leader and the elaborate personality cult surrounding his person and family. While it is vital for political analyses to define regime types, the question arises whether this definition is sufficient to analyse the nature, agency and effects of the DPRK, its foreign policy actions and spectacles. Also, it does little to explain how the states within the geographical and political proximity of North Korea react to it.

There is no doubt that the North Korean hierarchy is bent on keeping up the country's appearance as one of the world's most secluded and enigmatic places – both to the international society and its own 24 million citizens. The state is willing to go a long way to apply coercive measures against those who fall from the North Korean way of life. However, the regime of the DPRK is no enigmatic entity, and never has been. Being part of the “other” half of the world during the times of the Cold War has led North Korea to pursue the same developmental goals as most other socialist states in the post-colonial era have. It aimed to create a modern ideal of a secular, disenchanted society, free from traditional, restrictive beliefs. As in most other revolutionary polities, this involved a more explicit and conscious intervention by state power than in capitalist societies. Paradoxically, while aiming to demystify traditional norms and ideas by applying the established techniques of state and nation building borrowed from earlier European examples, the authority and power of the revolutionary leadership ended up being mystified. In the North Korean case, this implied the consolidation of Kim Il-sung as the country's unquestioned charismatic leader. This is not a unique phenomenon though. Indeed, many revolutionary states brought forth charismatic leaders like Kim Il-sung – notably Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. The experience of North Korea is hence fundamentally no different than those of other newly independent states of the twentieth century. What makes the regime of the DPRK exceptional is therefore not the specific relationship between the state and the society, anchored in a cult of personality surrounding a political leader, but the fact that this particular leader, his successors and their mode of rule have shown remarkable resilience even beyond death, defying the historical trends found in other revolutionary polities. In the North Korean case, the leader has become more of a symbol than a human being. (Kwon, Chung 2012, 1-3) A comparison to Cuba could be drawn – another revolutionary, “Communist” state with a central leader-figure to recently have undergone hereditary succession. While historical and identity-forming processes are indeed similar in both countries, Cuba developed a type of statehood
that is legitimized differently – via the provision of welfare and other more "classic" ends of state organisation. Further, Cuba is less isolated, and the charisma of its leader(s) is less tightly bound up in a range of symbols and ceremonial practices as it is the case in North Korea.

Max Weber argued in his definition of charismatic authority that this type of leadership usually originates in a time of crisis – like a revolution or decolonisation. Charismatic authority may be the most inventive type of authority, as it aims to create a new order. However, once the society in question has overcome the original rupture that caused the charismatic authority to emerge and consolidates its internal stability, the leadership changes as well. It becomes permanent, and takes on the characteristics of one of the other types of authority – bureaucratic or traditional. (Sukale 2002: 394)

But how has the North Korean leadership overcome the impermanent nature of charismatic authority, and achieved what Max Weber called the “routinization of revolutionary charisma” - a process even Weber himself doubted to be feasible? (Kwon, Chung 2012: 43, 44) The death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 did not lead to a change of the political course of the regime – nor its type of leadership. The succession from Kim Il-sung to his son Kim Jong-il was the “Communist world's first hereditary transfer of power”, and a transfer of charismatic authority. (Buzo 2002: 174) Now, after the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011, this process seems to have repeated itself a second time. The son, Kim Jong-un, was immediately bestowed the same honours as his father. How can the rise of the younger Kim to the same heights of authority be explained? How was it possible to transfer the charisma of an individual? The process began already in the 1970ies, and resulted in a destruction of the distinction between public art and state politics in North Korea.

In 1998, Japanese political analyst Haruki Wada first drew on the concept of the theatre state – albeit hesitantly – to study the North Korean leadership in the era of Kim Jong-il. According to Wada, North Korean stateliness did change during the times of the first succession – it became more ritualized, relying largely on symbols and theatrical means to execute power than the partisan state of Kim II-sung had done before. After 1994, Wada did begin to see certain characteristics normally associated with what anthropologist Clifford Geertz described as a “theatre state”. But is the theatre state concept really appropriate to discuss the developments of the DPRK – can the transfer of charisma from one individual to the other really be explained by the use of spectacles and dramatizations of the socio-political? Haruki Wada himself doubted it, and only carefully applied the concept. Others, like Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, argue that the theatre state is, in an expanded version, fitting to analyse contemporary North Korea. (cf. Kwon, Chung 2012)

In order to detect if the theatre state indeed provides an alternative approach to analysing the North Korean state and its interactions with the outside world, a synopsis of the concept will follow.
3. The theatre state concept by Clifford Geertz

A central element of this thesis is the concept of the theatre state. Developed by Clifford Geertz in *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (published in 1980), the concept originally aims to analyse the ritualized nature of the Balinese pre-colonial state apparatus. Based on an extension of Max Weber's definitions of the state and legitimisation of authority, the concept advances a semiotic theory of culture and a rhetoric-based theory of power. (cf. Geertz 1980: 6, 7; Kwon, Chung 2012: 45)

A theatre state, according to Geertz, is to be understood in terms of political anthropology as a state that is directed neither towards tyranny nor government, but towards the performance of spectacle, ceremony and public dramatization of specific occurrences in order to execute power. In contrast to more “classic” – or Western – theories of social organisation, the theatre state does not put a direct emphasis on ends like securing a certain level of welfare within the national society to consolidate state power, but finds legitimisation by employing symbols, myths and rites. Temple dedications, pilgrimages, blood sacrifices, ritual suicides and mobilizing hundreds of people and great quantities of wealth were, in the dramatic nature of the Balinese state, not “[...] means for political ends, they were what the state was for.” (Geertz 1980: 13) By performing these kinds of rituals and spectacles, the state turned into a theatre play, in which all classes of society were assigned fixed roles as directors, supporting cast, stage crew and audience, and got to reproduce their own social realities. It allowed the people to cast ideas of the way the world ultimately was, what place they had in it and the way they should therefore act, into immediately apprehended sensuous symbols – a lexicon of carvings, gestures, temples, dances and chants reflecting the social status system they lived in – rather than into an ordered set of explicit beliefs. The spectacle was a political end in itself. (Geertz 1980: 103) Here, a distinct parallel to the Weberian theories of the state and authority can be detected. Max Weber argued that an authority is legitimate – and therefore more durable – if it provides, through a preoperative system of symbols, a normative order that functions as a guideline for the people within its state society. This includes not only specified beliefs, but also the binding character of classification systems or ritual orders, the exemplary function of a charismatic leader and the compulsory nature of a legal system. The provision of public goods such as welfare, to stick with the example, is incorporated, but not paramount in this aspect of Weber's argumentation. (cf. Breuer 1998: 20, 21)

*Negara* is a Sanskrit loanword in Indonesian language that is to mean “palace”, “capital”, “state”, “realm” or “town”. It was the term used to denote the royal court of the Balinese king. By making the *Negara* the focus of his study, Geertz points out to how the king and his court, the exemplary
centre, provides a faultless image of civilized existence to the rest of society. By doing so, the royal court shaped the world around it into an image of its own excellency. It functioned in a paradigmatic way – not just a reflective one. (Geertz 1980: 13) Once again in a Weberian approach Geertz isolates the dominant class of a society (the Negara) and analyses how the other classes construe themselves around it through symbolic connections – and hence reproduce the existing social order. (cf. Breuer 1998: 21) Geertz concludes that what the Balinese theatre state did for its society was to cast into sensible form a concept of what the people, together, were supposed to make of themselves: “an illustration of the power of grandeur to organise the world.” (Geertz 1980: 102)

Within the frameworks of the theatre state concept, Geertz points out how power is defined in classical Weberian terms: as the capacity to make decisions by which others are bound, with coercion its expression, violence its foundation and domination its aim. All reasoning like justice, order, virtue and liberty, as well as related ones like command, control, strength and subjection, will eventually return to this conception of power. This defines the political as a domain of social action, whose main purpose is that of mastery. (Geertz 1980: 134) Against this background, however, the theatre state concept puts an emphasis on the dramatizations of the socio-political, through the use of symbols and signs. It hence interprets power as performative and symbolic, rather than institutional. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 65)

In this context, Geertz defines “symbols” as vehicles for ideas that take the shape of anything that denotes, describes, represents, exemplifies, labels, indicates, evokes, depicts or expresses. Any symbol is hence intersubjective, thus public, and thus accessible to overt and corrigible plein air explication. In accordance with this understanding, rituals, technologies, social formations, arguments, speeches, maps and pictures are not idealities to be stared at, but texts to be read. (Geertz 1980: 135) Geertz highlights here that for construing the expressions of the theatre state it is vital to keep in mind that “symbolic” does not oppose “real”, just like the fact that the dramaturgy of power is not to be seen as external to its workings. (Geertz 1980: 136)

By creating the theatre state concept, Geertz captured aspects of exemplary ceremonial, model-and-copy hierarchy, expressive competition, iconic kinship, organisational pluralism, particulate loyalty, dispersive authority, and confederate rule that constituted a dense and immediate reality within a certain type of pre-colonial statehood. Against this background, he further implies that all politics, including more contemporary types, consist on a certain level of symbolic action, which in turn is interpreted by the subjects of the state and the international society. (cf. Geertz 1980: 136) Here, Geertz challenges the Weberian theory, by using a Foucauldian approach. He argues that
cultural and political texts. The concept and discourse of the state – regardless of what its exact nature may be – and its actions are but one part of a broader process governing and shaping the conduct of people. From this perspective, state effects exist precisely because people act as if the state existed, orienting themselves to the image constructed by it and of it. (cf. Hay, Lister 2006: 14)

Indeed, the theatre state concept cannot just be seen as a mere expansion of Weberian approaches, but more as a critical engagement with Western conceptions of sovereignty and political rule. The theatre state concept challenges the comprehension of state power as the monopoly of coercive forces (bureaucracy, army, police, etc.), and argues for an analysis of non-Western societies that incorporates specific circumstances, as well as historical and cultural structures. Paradoxically, this means that Geertz still falls into the broader prism of Weberian historical sociology and, in particular, into Weber's topology of political and moral authority. After all, the theatre state analyses spectacles, such as demonstrations of military might and public speeches of secular political leaders made according to the order of traditional religious oratory. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 65)

The concept of the theatre state proved very fruitful. Not only did it influence the practice of symbolic anthropology and proposed an alternative analysis of pre-colonial societies, it also opened a window for a different approach to the study of the modern state and its politics.

It is argued in this thesis that the theatre state is an expandable construct, and not only suitable to describe nineteenth-century Bali. Clifford Geertz developed the concept to describe a pre-colonial society in a way that contested the conventional discourse of Oriental despotism, but formed it out of concern about the turbulent developments in modern societies in the age of decolonization and the Cold War.

3.1 Expanding the theatre state concept

In order to employ the theatre state concept for the analysis of modern North Korea however, it is necessary to think of symbolic politics in a more dynamic way. As already mentioned, Haruki Wada had some reservations concerning the utility of the concept in regards to the DPRK, as the theatre state presumes a static order of society – it is not congenial to dynamic changes. All groups or classes within the state hold certain fixed roles and through the use of the spectacle reproduce their own status in society – they reaffirm their own reality. The partisan state of Kim Il-sung however did not display this kind of static order. There are no fixed norms or rules in guerrilla warfare, and ritualistic formalism does not go in accordance with guerrilla politics. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 63, 64)

Despite the aspect of continuity and longevity of the political leadership, the regime was forced to go through a significant change after the death of Kim Il-sung – the state's central authority. It is
argued here that in order to transfer individual charismatic power and achieve the “routinization of revolutionary charisma”, Kim Jong-il had to mobilize state apparatuses and reach back into country's past to turn aspects of Korea's pre-revolutionary traditions into symbols that enabled him to consolidate his power. These symbolic actions involve theatrical performances, festivals, dances, musicals, cinema, opera, literature and mass mobilizations. Paradoxically, also religious aspects of Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity were used as vehicles to transport a normally non-religious ideology. (cf. Kendall 2008: 161; Kwon, Chung 2012: 18, 26; cf. Lankov 2007) Therefore it is argued in this context that symbolisms and performances can be created, and can take on a variety of different meanings if need be. Also, it is assumed that by creating the Sŏn'gun “military first” policy, Kim Jong-il managed to gain the army's support and succeeded in fixating the state's interest groups to a certain extent. The partisan guerrilla state took on a structure. These aspects are largely internal to North Korean culture. (cf. Kim 2010) However, the DPRK does not only use symbols and performances to shape its own national society and consolidate power, it also performs and dramatizes on the global stage, making the international society its audience. To illustrate this process, an analysis of specific implementations of the national and international spectacle will now follow.
4. Symbols, performances and theatrics in the DPRK

Performances and symbols have long been recognized as important tools of statecraft. They occupy a vital role in any country as instruments for the reinforcement of the authority of the state, the reproduction of state power in a given setting and the mediation between the state and its domestic and international audiences. Symbolic practices undergird sovereignty – in both Western and non-Western interpretations of the state. The more normative the conception of the state, the better it can be sustained by employing appropriate and manipulated symbols and motifs associated with the nation. (cf. Breuer 1998: 20, 21) Any state's exercise of authority is tightly bound up in a range of symbolic practices. Although states appear to be “real” – with a clearly bordered territory and institutions housed in physical structures – their coercive powers and sovereignty can only become real and meaningful through symbols and performances. This becomes palpable in common, every day practices, from handling paper currency to hearing the national anthem played at sporting events, to procedures governing the behaviour towards national flags and monuments. Further, symbols assert themselves most evidently in state ceremonies and rituals organized around landmark events, such as national holidays, key diplomatic events – or transitions of power from one leader to the next. In any nation, ritualistic, symbolic performances function as a mediating layer surrounding the “real” state and its “often-enigmatic inner workings”. (Medlicott 2005: 71)

However, in the specific case of North Korea – a state whose sovereignty is strained and whose splitting differences with its southern half violently complicate matters of self-identity – theatrics, symbols and performances play a more unique and determinative role.

4.1 Historical and religious cultural heritage in North Korea

In this thesis, the prevalent understanding of “culture” is based on the ethnological conception of the term. Culture is seen as superordinate concept that claims to encompass all other social spheres: politics, religion, sports, etc. In this respect, culture is understood as a totality, and defined by Clifford Geertz as “[...] a fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions.” (Kirby 1995) Culture is shared knowledge. (Faschingeder 2004: 18)

In appraising the cultural practices of North Korea, the fact that the country has inherited a historically sedimented sense of sovereignty and autonomy from a separate and non-Western Confucian tradition needs to be taken into consideration. During its pre-colonial era, the Korean peninsula was an inherent part of a geopolitical order dominated by imperial China. Carol Medlicott constructs an argument by likening the Confucian world system of imperial China to Geertz’
Negara, as it consisted of a similar exemplary centre (the emperor) shaping the world around it according to its own image based on an all-pervasive hierarchical order (Medlicott 2005: 72, cf. Geertz 1980: 13), and argues that North Korea took on the same type of social organisation and mode of rule.

The Confucian tradition and the imperial structures of China created a strong, moral heritage for the peninsula – a heritage that outlasted even the period of Japanese colonial rule. Aspects of Confucian familialism, especially the virtue of collective filial piety, were most distinctive in North Korea's early revolutionary politics. (Armstrong 2004: 223) The idea of the political leadership – first and foremost in its embodiment in an individual – as an exemplary centre was mobilized by Kim Il-sung during the North Korean revolution. Through the use of kinship rhetoric, Kim began to represent himself as a kind of father figure to the North Korean nation, his role akin to the head of a household, with his “children” naturally having to pay him the greatest respect. The role of the “father” of the state is unquestioned, he is the source of all wisdom and his authority is absolute. Hence the political order of the DPRK has been referred to as a neo-Confucian “family state”. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 18)

Confucian lifestyle and religious practices not only shaped ideas of political and social organisation in Korea, but also contributed to the region's expressive culture. Shamanism, the role of theatrical reproductions of everyday life in rituals, or the use of theologically or traditionally charged symbols and values in the household are just some expressions of this symbolic character of culture. (Kendall 2008: 161) Further, it needs to be added that especially in the twentieth century, ideas of European nationalism and Christianity became influential, providing sources for innumerable symbols and metaphors. (Medlicott 2005: 72)

In this thesis, two aspects of the North Korean national “theatre” will be analysed: one, cultural productions in the shape of pictorial representations generated by the regime, and two, the relationship and contact of the country's idealized leader with the broad masses of ordinary citizens. Both parts are connected to each other, as the first enables and prepares the second. This analysis is to show that North Korea's ritualistic performances go beyond the “regular” use of symbolic actions and spectacles, and define the DPRK as a theatre state.

4.2 The meaning of cultural productions in modern North Korea

Due to its level of isolationism, its strange ideological traditions and questionable choices in policy-making, North Korea is often presented as the quintessential “other”. It is in many respects alien to “us”, and what we perceive as normal. Most Western analyses therefore tend to impose “our” own images and interpretations. In doing so, Cold War rhetoric often laces “our” definitions of what
the DPRK is really like. The perspective chosen in the frame of this thesis is, due to the lack of insight into the North Korean society, no exception. The concepts applied to analyse national art and its meaning in the realm of politics are Western ones, this has to be kept in mind. (cf. De Ceuster 2007)

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is to be understood as the realm of works of art, which includes literature, paintings, and theatre plays. (Bourdieu 1993: 102) This definition is for the purpose of this chapter extended by adding monuments, photography, musicals, dances and films to the list. Works of art, whatever their nature may be, have always served as vehicles for certain ideas or messages, and have been embedded in the fabric of tradition. According to Walter Benjamin however, the meaning of art changed along with the methods of production in the twentieth century. In respect to the rise of Fascism and Communism in Europe, Benjamin argues that art is in the age of mechanical production based on politics, rather than any traditional ritualistic value, such as ideals of beauty. (Benjamin 1969: 5) In times characterized by revolution and nation building, be it in the Western or the non-Western understanding, art becomes an instrument for charismatic ideology, which is the ultimate basis of belief in the value of a work of art, and therefore the basis of functioning of the field of production and circulation of cultural goods. Political conflicts between the dominant and the dominated classes about the legitimate, aesthetic version of the world – about what deserves to be represented and the right way to represent it – reflect the power to impose the dominant definition of reality, and social reality in particular. (Bourdieu 1993: 76, 102) Art pour l’art, art for art's sake, becomes a distant conception as revolutionary goals trump aesthetic appeal. In order to fully comprehend the field of cultural production it is not sufficient to say that the history of the field is the history of the struggle for monopolistic power to impose the legitimate categories of perception and appreciation. It is the struggle itself that creates the history of the field. (Bourdieu 1993: 106)

In North Korea, the mobilization of traditional, Confucian values and the creation of a national narrative originating in the anti-colonial struggle influenced the production of cultural goods from the beginning. The image of the “Great Leader” as the “father of the nation and all ethnic Koreans” and hence as the most ideal person to lead was transported right away through pictorial accounts. As in the Stalinist USSR, all forms of art were utilized for the purpose of ideology, to “discipline society” by creating a common narrative and consolidate charismatic authority. (cf. Altrichter 2007: 120) It needs to be pointed out however that it would be wrong to see the DPRK as a mere caricature of a Stalinist society, or as the country that “took it one step further”. In fact, North Korean cultural production took on its own momentum in the early 1970ies, with the introduction of Kim Jong-il to national politics and society. The younger Kim almost immediately began to
wield power over the direction of art by drastically increasing the production of artworks reflecting the Chuch’e ideology. Kim Jong-il felt at home in this field, as he could apply certain artistic talents he possessed. He even wrote Misullon (“Treatise of Art”), in which he described the relationship between humans and the “perfect” function of Chuch’e art that “fuses ideology and aesthetics, and best fits the people's emotions and thoughts”. (Yoon 2012: 56) The central part of art's duties is to cultivate humans into revolutionaries and to be a vehicle for what is considered the “true”, Chuch’e way of life. No other kind of art is therefore worth making. This politicization of culture was a top-down, vertical movement, aimed to eliminate all “bourgeois” and colonial elements deemed dangerous for a socialist Korea centred on Kim Il-sung. Art, and all other cultural productions, are politicised in North Korea, and are acts of power – they are an external manifestation of the state's needs. (Yoon 2012: 53)

A reoccurring element in North Korean cultural productions, be it paintings, plays, poems or film, are historical themes, ranging from the Japanese colonial period, through the Korean War, to the reconstruction years. What is noteworthy is that the representations of these moments in time reflect a certain interpretation of what actually happened, and are, in most cases, organised around the figure of Kim Il-sung – the exemplary centre.

4.2.1 Pictorial Representations

The most palpable products of North Korean culture and identity politics are pictorial representations in the shape of paintings, colour prints, photographs, films and monuments. Idealized portraits of the two deceased leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are, along with depictions of the national symbols of North Korea, the first graphics to greet visitors on the DPRK’s official homepage. Indeed, these portraits are found everywhere throughout the country: in official buildings like government institutions, schools, and libraries, as well as military and police facilities. Pictures of the two leaders (and sometimes of Kim Jong-suk, Kim Il-sung’s first wife and mother of Kim Jong-il) are to be found in almost every household. (Lankov 2007: 7) The omnipresence of the “Great Leader” Kim is reinforced by the custom that all citizens are required to wear the DPRK’s flag, the national emblem or a pin with Kim's face on it visibly attached to their clothing. Countless gigantic monuments reminding of the revolutionary struggle or statues of the Kims mark landscapes throughout the whole country, and are well maintained. Only recently, in February 2013, to honour the 71st birthday of Kim Jong-il, his memorial in P'yŏngyang was restored and equipped with a new, more modern-looking jacket – to show that the deceased leader was still a vital part of North Korea.

Taking a look inside the society of the DPRK and its cultural productions is difficult. Not many impulses come out, and even less get in. Only in the summer of 2010, the Museum of Applied Arts
in Vienna hosted an exhibition titled “Flowers for Kim Il-sung”. Over 100 paintings from the Korean Art Gallery in P’yŏngyang were featured. This was the first time North Korea sent a large number of artworks abroad for an exhibition. The many portrayals of Kim Il-sung were considered the most striking images by many. (cf. Yoon 2012) Having visited the exhibition, I can confirm this impression. Almost every single one of these portraits depicted the ”Great Leader” at specific moments in his life – be it during the struggle against Japanese colonialism and American imperialists, or flying the red banner of the three revolutions of ideology, technology and culture – which turned out to be formative, historic moments for the whole nation. The illustrations of these events are often highly idealized, and to be called ”interpretations” of reality at best. Kim is always shown wearing military uniform, and sometimes with a white horse. While it may not have been historically correct that Kim rode a horse, it is proper and truthful to show it in the context of the paintings. (Yoon 2012: 66) It further needs to be noted that these pictures were mostly created from the 1970ies onwards – under the direction of Kim Jong-il. The son contributed profoundly to the myths that surrounded his father, by portraying him as the perfect leader for the country, the father figure for all Koreans who would unite the peninsula and turn it into the most powerful, prosperous nation in the world – and indirectly, himself, as the only one able to share his vision and continue in this path. Kim Jong-il thereby created mechanisms that not only worked for his father, but for him as well. By employing Christian themes and metaphors, a myth (that later on turned into the official version of his life) was created, so his special, if not divine, decent was obvious to the population. Kim Jong-il is said to have been born on 16th February 1942 in a humble log cabin on Mount Paektu, the highest mountain of Korea and sight of the revolutionary war, while a bright star crossed the sky. The truth is that Kim was born in the Soviet Union a year earlier, at an army base near the border, where his father was stationed at the time. Because it would be inconvenient, for nationalist reasons, to have the successor born on foreign soil, this version was fabricated in official biographies. (Yoon 2012: 68, Medlicott 2005: 73) By 1986, Kim Jong-il was titled ”Dear Leader” and shared the political rule with his father. The row of portraits of the older Kim in the 2010 exhibition in Vienna was aptly named ”Images of the Immortal”. Not only was Kim posthum bestowed the title ”Eternal President of the Republic” (which makes him, to this day, the official political leader of the country), but his face is so tightly interwoven with the national narrative and self-identity, the citizens of North Korea find it impossible to think of themselves and their community without thinking of the ”Great Leader”. Though style-wise, the Vienna exhibition cannot be seen as representative of North Korean art in general, it can be seen as an example of the mobilisation of culture for the sake of the construction
of the socialist state. The DPRK is run like a choreographed guerrilla base camp and art is used to prepare and ideologically mould the population into this kind of thinking. Utter devotion to the country, its leaders and ideals are essential for the existence of the regime. (De Ceuster 2007: n.p.)

In the DPRK, the question ”Is this art?” is never asked directly. There is little to no room left for ambiguity in artworks, or subjective, individual impressions. Art is not the expression of an individual, but the product of a collective of up to one hundred people, who are assigned to figure out the best way to convey state-approved messages to the people. This is supposed to generate shared emotions in the national audience, it is to portray the achievements of Korean socialism and symbolise the ideality of society. Art functions within a performative utopia. (Yoon 2012: 54)

While there are plenty of revolutionary novels (five of them are said to have been written by Kim Il-sung himself) and epic poems to commemorate the nation-building process, literature isn't a very popular art form in North Korea. Theatre, opera and musicals on the other hand are very much preferred by the ministry of culture and ideology, as they offer the possibility to transform the written word into visuals. Also, they are quite easily propagated, and need little technological equipment. Theatre companies used to travel the land and play in the most remote villages, telling the story of how Comrade Kim fought the imperialists and nationalists, and showed the world what a strong country the DPRK was. A tradition for theatre and theatrics existed in Korean culture before – and the Kims knew how to mobilize it. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 52, 53)

Kim Jong-il staged one of the five revolutionary novels, The Flower Girl⁴, as a play, a musical and then turned into one of the most successful North Korean films. In 1973, Kim Jong-il wrote “Theory of Art and Cinema”, a treatise that is to this day regarded in North Korean art history as a masterpiece that revolutionised the philosophy of socialist art. In 1987, an essay titled “The Cinema and Directing” followed, in which Kim stated that “The cinema occupies an important place in the overall development of art and literature. As such it is a powerful ideological weapon for the revolution and construction.” (Kim 1987, cited in Gourevitch 2003: n.p.) The films made under Kim Jong-il's direction were not creations, but recreations and dramatizations of tradition.

By the time of his death in December 2011, Kim Jong-il was said to have owned over 20,000 video cassettes and DVDs, his collection including American Westerns, James Bond movies and Japanese monster films. His interest in Western pop culture, his direct influence on cultural production and own personal tastes were regarded as strange characteristics in a despotic leader by many, but Kwon and Chung make an argument that the younger Kim's artistic ambitions and interest in Western

⁴Original Title: Kkot P'anŭn Ch'ŏnyŏ, also translated The Flower-Selling Girl, the story of an impoverished, fatherless girl who finds a sense of belonging and purpose in the partisan movement, and a father-figure in the Great Leader Kim Il-sung. Film adaption in 1972.
Another fascinating cultural production of North Korea are the so called “mass games” - highly choreographed gymnastic events that incorporate elements of musicals and involve several hundred participants. The tradition of these “mass games” culminated in the early 2000s, in the creation of the Arirang festival. Its detailed contents change every year, particularly the background performances: thousands of spectator-actors deliver important slogans and events by moving handheld multi-coloured pickets and flash cards in scrupulously synchronised movements. The foreground performances tell the story of the country's political genesis in the form of dance, song and mass-gymnastics. Often times the storyline of *The Flower Girl*, or one of the other revolutionary operas are used. The Arirang spectacle is a powerful combination of art and politics. It is also what the DPRK wishes to say to its own people and to the outside world, based on the mobilized performance labour of several hundred school children, women and soldiers. The Arirang performance is the act of the state dramatically uniting itself with its citizen in the act of speech, “in which the citizens stand as the parole for the language of the state.” (Kwon, Chung 2012: 73) This performance of the masses does not only communicate what the political leadership wants to express, it is the masses participating in the making and renewing, through the labour of drama, the sovereign body of the state as a vital and historical moral entity. It is the people, in a collective, uniform manner, reproducing their own social reality. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 74) The Arirang festival is therefore the closest parallel to what Geertz called expressions of a theatre state. Also, the integration of the public into the Arirang spectacle, be it as participants or audience, prepares and determines another important aspect of North Korea's charismatic authority: that of the interaction of the leader with the population.

4.2.2 The leader “going on progress”

The regime of the DPRK always made sure never to promote ideas that would go completely against the population's common sense or experiences. Any belief in the Kims having superhuman powers for instance has carefully been suppressed. Still, defectors tell of how people all over the countryside believed that Kim Il-sung had created the world, and that Kim Jong-il commanded the weather. Especially in face of the disastrous famine in the 1990ies, that was caused by heavy rainfalls and floods (along with the grave mismanagement of the economy) and had an estimated death toll of two million people, the propaganda machinery worked hard to do away with these

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5 Most of the diplomatic visitors who were allowed into the country are made to attend the Arirang festival, including former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.
ideas, pointing out how Kim's expertise lay in the field of military, and that he had no influence on the weather.

However, it isn't too surprising that people would develop superstitions concerning their “Eternal President” Kim Il-sung, was he not called “the Sun of the Nation”, a title that was used for the pre-modern Chinese emperor, to underline his life-giving powers? Carol Medlicott describes this tendency to glorify the leader and dubbing his birthday “the day of the sun”, akin to the reign of France's “sun king” Louis XIV. Even more accurate seems a comparison to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* that is depicted as taking the shape of a man, whose body is literally composed of the bodies of all people, to express the power of the state. (Medlicott 2005: 76) Noteworthy is also, to stick with the parallels to pre-modern Europe, that in Elizabethan England, the queen's character as a politician and her mode of rule were symbolically reproduced through motifs like the tudor rose. The Kims are represented through symbols like the sun, the North Star, two species of begonias and the Mount Paektu – symbols whose meaning is carefully explained on the state's official website of the DPRK. (DPRK Online 2011)

The most profound commonality between Elizabethan England and North Korea is perhaps the pattern of the regent “going on progress” - that is to mean the performance of ceremonial circuits by the leader through the country. This way, political terrain is created out of rural territory, by demonstrating grandeur and power to the people and reinforcing ideology. (Medlicott 2005: 76) In the case of North Korea, it was already Kim Il-sung who took tours through the country, presenting himself to inhabitants of even the most remote villages. This way, people knew the “Great Leader” was real, and not just a face on a painting or the hero in a legend. Kim could reinforce the national narrative and his own charisma by parading through the countryside and interacting with working-class North Koreans. He transformed himself from a state authority to a paternal figure. Kim Jong-il accompanied his father almost as soon as he was made Minister of Culture in the 1970ies, and toured military facilities, factories, schools, construction sites, and farms. Jong-il continued to perform “on-the-spot-guidance” flying visits throughout the rest of his political career. In the two last years of his life, Kim Jong-il is said to have appeared more than 300 times in front of the public. This included visits to China and Russia. The special train he travelled in – his preferred means of transport – was called “Train towards People”. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 183) While Kim didn't interact much with the people – many citizens never heard their “Dear Leader's” voice, as his speech was rumoured to have been affected by a stroke he had suffered – he was not really required to. His presence alone reflected his grandeur, and photographs were taken to eternalise the moment. Kim Jong-il is said to have died from a heart attack on his train back from an unspecified “on-the-spot-

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6A satirical online blog titled „Kim Jong-il looking at things“ has an impressive collection of these photographs. 
http://kimjongillookingatthings.tumblr.com/
guidance” visit. (Beck 2012:66)

Due to these continuous visual and rhetoric reinforcements of the Kims glory, crowds in North Korea know how to behave. Important announcements are live and public, and the people of P'yŏngyang assemble in the largest square to hear messages from the leader (even if it is often a designated spokesperson reading them out). The few Western observers who were allowed to attend such announcements of the political leadership in the capital were stunned by the reaction of the listening masses. The numerous people in the crowd act as if on cue by starting and stopping to clap and cheer at the exact same time. Due to the continuous visual and rhetoric reinforcements of the Kims glory, crowds in North Korea know how to behave. Important announcements are live and public, and the people of P'yŏngyang assemble in the largest square to hear messages from the leader (even if it is often a designated spokesperson reading them out). The few Western observers who were allowed to attend such announcements of the political leadership in the capital were stunned by the reaction of the listening masses. The numerous people in the crowd act as if on cue by starting and stopping to clap and cheer at the exact same time. A comparison to the performance of public mass rituals in Third Reich Germany almost imposes itself here.

Also, in February 2013, pictures of hundreds of people (civilians, if this can be the right term in the North Korean case) lined up in perfect military formation on the Kim Il-sung square in P'yŏngyang and pledged their lives to protect their “eternal shining star” - the title now attributed to Kim Jong-il's youngest son and successor, Kim Jong-un. It is unclear how exactly these masses were mobilized – was it a voluntary declaration of loyalty or was the crowd assembled and carefully choreographed? Fact is, the act went on camera and was projected to the whole nation and sent to foreign media outlets.

While the Kims knew how to strike awe in the people they reigned over, they knew it required fear, too. People in North Korea are aware of the existence of prison and labour camps. The governmental practice is not like in the Soviet Union, where criminals and “counter-revolutionary” individuals (along with, in some cases, their spouses) were sentenced to hard labour. In North Korea, whole families are transported to camps, including small children and distant relatives. This is an effective tool for weeding out elements that could endanger the regime, but also for disciplining society. (cf. Collins 2012)

Citizens of the DPRK are educated to pledge their lives not only to their political leader(s) - their “exemplary centre”, but to the system that is created by their leaders and then reproduced by society. Anyone who wavers or ever shows hostile behaviour in this reproducing process is severely punished. When during the great famine in the 1990ies people trying to cross the northern border into China in search for food where caught, they were sent to labour camps as punishment for putting lower needs before honouring the ideological goals of the country. (cf. Lankov 2007: 171) Kim Jong-il understood that the perpetual clapping he got to hear wherever he went was generated by both admiration and terror. And he worked hard to maintain that balance.
4.3 The routinization of revolutionary charisma

The development of the DPRK's regime and the personality cult it is based on have often been likened to what happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin, in the People's Republic of China under Mao, or even in National-Socialist Germany under Hitler – leaders who famously generated cults around their own person that resembled religious adoration. The North Korean case is an exception however, in the sense that the death of the charismatic authority Kim Il-sung did not lead to an opening or a change of the system, as it did in other regimes. Kim himself had made sure of that. General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev, responsible for the process of De-Stalinisation, was portrayed as a traitor. The same happened to the PRC's Deng Xiaoping. Betrayal is one of the most undesirable human qualities in the morality of socialist societies, as it is seen as discarding the whole revolutionary body of thought. While the other two significant Communist realms changed their pace after the death of their respective charismatic leaders, North Korean personality cult was strengthened, and used as a particular form of resistance to the global trend of bureaucratic rationalisation of political rule in the socialist world. Political succession was seen as determining the direction of the socialist revolution – and choosing a son as the successor seemed the most reliable choice. Kim Il-sung kept up the impression that the country was still involved in a guerrilla war, and that only through the Chuch'e idea of self-reliance of the individual within the collective independence could be won. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 144) Kim Jong-il then continued in this path, by declaring his father the “Eternal President” of the DPRK – and thereby as immortal. The “Great Leader”, albeit dead for nineteen years, is still the exemplary centre.

Kim Jong-un, the third ruler of the “Kim dynasty” didn't enjoy the luxury of a preparation for leadership starting decades in advance, like his father had. Kim Jong-il had failed to introduce him properly to society and the political scene. However, in December 2011, the structures that enabled the then 28-year-old to take the rein and “inherit” the revolutionary charisma existed, and where perhaps stronger than ever. There was speculation Jong-un was chosen to be the next ruler of the DPRK not because he was first in line – he has several older brothers who by Korean tradition would have more right to “claim the throne” – but because apparently he displays the desirable qualities of masculinity, determination and hard drinking. Further, he physically resembles his grandfather Kim Il-sung the most, so a notion of reincarnation might be implied. (cf. Lim 2012: 559) The North Korean media immediately started to bestow the greatest attributes to Jong-un, called him the “Great Successor” and “a great person born of heaven”. This second title, which seems to be referring to classically Christian narratives – was enjoyed already by both his father and grandfather. While Kim II-sung is still the “sun” of the North Korean nation, Kim Jong-un is now
referred to as the “Morning Star”, and since April 2012 has his own repetitively aired propaganda hymn dedicated to his honours. (Branigan 2012: n.p.)

The succession of Kim Jong-un came with several changes in ideology though. The mentioned badges portraying a smiling Kim Il-sung, a subject of curiosity and sometimes even ridicule to foreigners, had been altered. The new version of the badges show father Kim Il-sung and son Kim Jong-il, happily united against the background of a dynamically flying red flag. Other buttons, only showing the face of Kim Jong-il, exist now as well – something that hitherto would have been unthinkable. Also, new statues of both deceased leaders standing next to each other started to show up in P'yŏngyang. This implies that the image of Kim Jong-il was significantly upgraded. Whether these changes can be interpreted as expressions of a progression in a linear, continuous development, or if they mark a major disruption is still unclear though. The question arises whether both leaders have been successfully merged into one now, so that they can be regarded as the same entity, rather than two separate individuals. This seems disputable. (Frank 2012: n.p.)

Several aspects have led to the charismatic authority of Kim Il-sung becoming hereditary to a certain extent. A significant aspect was the division of Korea, which resulted in a strained sense of sovereignty. This called for a new national narrative to be created – but since the North Koreans didn't perceive themselves as a new nation, the pursuit of the unification of the peninsula had to be made the main goal of the DPRK. This implied a permanent state of preparation to embark on more guerrilla warfare. The country found a national base in its strained sovereignty, the whole purpose of the DPRK was tied to Kim Il-sung and his vision of unification. Confucian values of family and filial piety strengthened the adoration of the “Great Leader”, and Christian narrative aspects enabled Kim to turn his son into his successor – in order to prevent a process like De-Stalinization from happening. North Korea developed myths and reproducible symbols of identity-forming character; it dramatized very specific events that are connected to either the anti-imperialist struggle in a post-colonial world or the leader himself. In order for North Korea not to lose its goal of reunification and the retrieval of complete sovereignty, Kim Il-sung became immortalized after his death. This is to mean that he is still very much an active part of the DPRK’s statehood and identity. To this day, North Koreans refer to themselves as comrades of Kim Il-sung, and as the “Kim Il-sung race”. (Beck 2012: 38)

Aside from constitutional monarchies, the DPRK has become the only modern state to have undergone hereditary succession twice. (Lim 2012: 550) The idea of the nation is tied to the “Kim Dynasty”. North Korea employs spectacle, such as performances of military might and mobilisations of hundreds of people to pursue even the most unrealistic goals set by the leader, in order to reinforce its own right of existence as a nation, its pursuit of unification and its demand for
uncontested sovereignty. Importantly, there is little room for flexibility: “in order to turn a process into a ritual and an image into an icon, stability and consistency are key strategies.” (Frank 2012: n.p.) Without the Kims, there is no DPRK, and without the DPRK, there would be no Kimist society. The political leaders of the DPRK have not merged into one and the same person, but managed to intertwine the core principles and purpose of “their nation” with themselves. They shaped ideas about how they as individuals and as a family, along with society as a whole, ultimately are into an identity that could be passed on to the next generations. In this respect Kim Jong-un is now the Supreme Leader of North Korea, which entails him being the First Secretary of the Worker's Party, the First Chairman of the National Defence Commission, the Supreme Commander of the People's Army and Chairman of the Central Military Commission – like his father and grandfather were before him. (CIA Factbook World Leaders 2013) It is not assumed here that the DPRK is a monolith whose political sphere consists of the figure of the leader alone, but it is argued that all significant power groups in the state – the Kims, the General staff of the military, the Party, and the public, contribute to the performance of the national spectacle that is to lead them to the same goal: the preservation of the system through the reproduction of their social reality.
5. The international spectacle

North Korea has been called a „hermit kingdom“, due to its strictly reclusive nature and the resulting lack of knowledge the outside world has about life in the DPRK. However, it would be false to assume that the country does not play a role in the international society. As a “Communist” state, North Korea has always been part of the “Second World” during the times of the Cold War, and since it is about the last entity of real State-socialism to still exist. This aspect, if curious to the rest of the global society, is of high importance to the self-perception and identity of the DPRK – and how it aims to be perceived by the rest of the world.

The following quote stems from “Understanding Sŏn'gun Politics”, an authoritative book published by the DPRK government in 2004 that explains the genealogy of the military-first-policy:

“The flag of Socialism was taken down in the former Soviet Union and eastern European countries. In the broader international sphere, people who long for socialism are thrown into confusion and left with no guidance. During this time of great trial, we refused to make any change. Instead, we raised our red flag of socialism even higher than before. This way, our country became the only remaining bastion of socialism and was illuminated with the esteemed honour of doing so.” (Sun 2004: 7, cited in Kwon, Chung 2012: 77) This paragraph is of interest, as it shows several aspects inherent to North Korean identity. It acknowledges that the country was part of the “Socialist bloc” during the Cold War, pursuing an alternative model of development. Further, all those looking for answers in socialism after the collapse of the Communist world can only look towards the DPRK now, as the last remaining socialist fortress. The unwillingness of the regime to alter its ways comes through – which is also a message popularly delivered during the Arirang spectacle “Do not hope for any change in me!” North Korea sees its order threatened, and thereby keeps up its attitudes. (cf. Kwon, Chung 2012: 12)

After the Korean War, the northern half of the peninsula remained largely unnoticed by the international society, or was perceived as a peculiar curiosity in the Communist world. Hardly anyone got out of the country, and those who did had no interest in or reason to promote the North Korean nation abroad. Then two things happened in the 1980ies and 1990ies that brought the DPRK back into the global limelight: The government started to demonstrate that it possessed nuclear technologies, and the knowledge to produce missiles that would be able to hit South Korea and Japan. Eventually, according to the claims of the Kimist regime, technologies would be advanced enough to produce missiles able to hit the United States – the imperialist enemy. It was unclear whether the DPRK actually possessed warheads of such reach, but again there was no real possibility to take insight into the situation. A factor of uncertainty and hence insecurity was created.
A puzzling contrast to this was the famine that hit the country around 1994, and required humanitarian organisations to send food aid. It was also the first time the North Korean government openly had to ask for help, and hence became the world's only nuclear power not able to feed its own people. (Beck 2011: 39)

As of today, North Korea branched out its foreign policy options, and entertains relations to its allies in the decades-long revolutionary fight against world imperialism, namely China, Iran and Syria, while making some minor modifications in its Middle East policy to account for the changes brought about by the Arab Spring. The DPRK now also explores new opportunities in Qatar and Kuwait. Kim Jong-un consciously strengthens the cooperation with all non-aligned countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia that show support to Pyōngyang. (Mansourov 2013: n.p.)

This thesis aims to show that the theatre state concept isn't just fit to describe a certain state and its internal society, but that the concept can be used to analyse the external agency of this state just as well. Also, it is assumed that the dramatization of events, the mobilization of masses, the use of symbols and signs and the employment of spectacle work in other types of statehood in a similar way. This applies significantly to capitalist societies, in which mass media have become both an extension of the self and the collective, and convey, as well as contribute to, the spectacle. The spectacle in industrialized states has been defined as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” (Debord 1994: 12), and conceptualized of visual expression as a “mass ornament”, and as an “end in itself”. (Kracauer 1995: 76, 78) Societies not only create the spectacle, but the spectacle continuously recreates societies. (cf. Boulding 1961) This implies that the “world-as-exhibition” continuously forces citizens into service as spectators. Therefore the spectacle works just as much on the global scale, which suggests that entities that perform actual spectacles – like the state of North Korea – perhaps find a more attentive audience. (Garoian, Gaudelius 2004: 301)

In order to analyse the international spectacle the DPRK is putting on, the following two aspects of North Korean foreign policy will be looked at: one, the trends in the negotiation process concerning nuclear disarmament and two, the (self)representation of North Korean domestic and foreign politics on global media platforms.
5.1 The Nuclear Threat: Imminence and Staginess

Taking its guerrilla history, strained sovereignty and the fact that it was part of the “Communist bloc” during the Cold War into consideration, it isn't completely surprising that North Korea would eventually develop nuclear technology. The strongest incentives for the nuclear armament were the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the external economic structures and the domestic public distribution system, as well as the resulting famine in the 1990ies – followed by the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. When faced with the extreme and chronic scarcity of food and the loss of their beloved leader, the party elite that had played such a key role in the country's order began to lose its control over the people. Many defected during those times, and the flow of refugees hasn't stopped since. Further, an underground market economy emerged, and the defectors contributed to the erosion of the state's barriers to information from the outside world. (Armstrong 2011: 359) As already mentioned, Kim Jong-il then employed the risk-management Sŏn'gun strategy (“military-first”), which included investment in nuclear armament. The development of nuclear weapons had two types of effects: one, the internal effect of demonstrating power, progress and technology to the people. It reinforced social obedience and the legitimacy of the Kimist leadership. The second effect it had was of an external nature: it diverted attention from the problem of the dysfunctional economic system by creating the need to defend the nation against the external threat of capitalism and post-colonial Western imperialism, which were blamed for the country's problems. (Lim 2012: 554) North Korea is known to have developed weapons using plutonium, as was famously demonstrated in several missile tests for military purposes. In 2010, rumours of a highly enriched uranium (HEU) plant surfaced, but were never sufficiently proven. (Beck 2011: 35) The fact that North Korea has managed to develop lethal weaponry was a reason for global concern. Also, the possibility of North Korea selling the knowledge of developing nuclear warheads to potentially dangerous states like Iran is alarming.

Since the early 1990ies, the USA has been trying to get the North Korean regime to agree to verifiably ending its nuclear weapons program. In 1994, the “Agreed Framework” was signed, which was to commence the process, but the country had been working on a military nuclear programme since the mid-1980ies, and had no sincere interest in giving it up. Since 2003, when the Framework officially collapsed due to another nuclear test, representatives from South Korea, Japan, China, Russia and the U.S. have been meeting periodically with North Korean officials in the Six Party Talks, trying the get the DPRK to abandon its nuclear program in return for political and economic compensation. This includes food and energy aid. (Oh, Hassig 2010: 92)

Despite taking up negotiations with neighbouring states, the Kimist regime doesn't shy away from demonstrating its technological achievements to the world. After a test in the 1990ies, a test
followed on 9\textsuperscript{th} October 2006, 4\textsuperscript{th} July 2009 and, most recently, 12\textsuperscript{th} February 2013. All these dates were very consciously chosen, they have a meaning for the “imperialist enemy”: the American Independence Day 2009, or the 12\textsuperscript{th} February 2013, when the State of the Union address of President Obama took place. When South Korea decided to participate in the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative, designed to prevent countries from transporting weapons of mass destruction and related material, P’yŏngyang reacted by withdrawing from the 1953 Korean War Armistice. This in itself wasn't considered very alarming, as it had happened on several occasions before (in 1994, 1996, 2003, 2006 and now in 2013). The UN Security Council had to respond to the nuclear provocations though. Military and economic sanctions against the DPRK were unanimously approved. It was agreed that the intention was to penalize the regime, not the inhabitants, and that, should the party agree to cooperate with the international society and comply with all measures contained in the resolution, the sanctions would be lifted. (cf. Lim 2012: 553) The DPRK however used the sanctions as another explanation for the country's economic troubles, which further demonised the West to the North Koreans citizens.

The DPRK rarely misses a chance to provoke the U.S., but never goes as far as to risk an American military response. While their confidence in its own technologies and military strength has grown, the regime clearly realises that it could not stand against American force. (Oh, Hassig 2010: 92) The security dilemma that results from this continuous threat of a nuclear strike, for both the North Korean citizens and the rest of the world, reminds of the military competition and the political contest during the times of the Cold War. (cf. Smith 2010: 22)

This neorealist approach to analysing the situation of North Korea does not take levels and effects of discourse into consideration however. When taking a look at the issue by applying Edelman’s “political media spectacle”, certain singularities in the discourse can be noticed.

5.1.1 The “Axis of Evil”

Murray Edelman argued that troubling conditions like the continuous threat of the well-being of a given society, regardless of whether it is caused by internal or external factors, persist as a paramount theme in political analysis. Issues come into discourse and therefore into existence as reinforcement of ideology. (Edelman 1988: 12, 13) In certain cases, governments and the media create problems that do not find direct evidence in the experience of their victims. They are more abstract, cannot be immediately felt, but win support for policies nonetheless. Being threatened by a foreign nation potentially commanding weapons of mass destruction is such a kind of problem, just like the idea of an imperialist force trying to take down the own sovereignty is. Creating a threat – a problem that cannot be solved in a simple manner, as several interest groups are involved –
consolidates the extension of executive power. Two kinds of actors play vital roles in the creation of a threat: one, political leaders, who can become signs of competence, evil, nationalism and future promise. These virtues and vices are assigned to leaders by the spectators, who thereby define their own political position. The second kind of actors is political enemies who act as adversaries and give the political spectacle its power to evoke passions, fears and hopes. The more so because an enemy to some is an ally – or leader – to others. (Edelman 2012: 66) Power, executed through a leader in face of an enemy, is created through a spectacle in the shape of a chronic sense of crisis. (Garoian, Gaudelius 2004: 301) In the North Korean case, the Kims have been both, leaders and enemies. This not only made them the main actors in the creation of the theatre, but also the exemplary centres.

In the post-Cold-War era, two of the most important goals of North Korean foreign policy have been to secure U.S. guarantees of the state's survival and to escape its own diplomatic isolation. In order to do that, the DPRK relied on crisis diplomacy – which contains of both provocations and concessions to the international society. (Beck 2012: 553) In 2002, in delivering his State of the Union address, then U.S. President Bush called North Korea a part of the “Axis of Evil”\(^9\) for possessing nuclear weapons, having terrorist intentions and potentially fraternising with other dangerous states, namely Iraq and Iran. While the term “Axis of Evil” was used to counter the DPRK's rhetoric of war and further isolate the country in the international society, it had exactly the opposite effect on Kim Jong-il, who was at the time perhaps at the height of his power. Instead of further secluding North Korea and himself from the outside world, Kim began to methodically meet foreign diplomats and heads of state. Being counted as part of the “Axis”, the North Korean regime was eventually given the platform it had tried to create for itself since the 1980ies. This specific piece of rhetoric created a sense of permanent crisis, which affected the “outside world” that is threatened by the DPRK, and at the same time affected the DPRK, that is threatened by the outside world. Being part of the “Axis” gave North Korea power, an international presence. So Kim began to interact with representatives of the international society in traditional terms, not just by uttering threats against the “American actions endangering North Korean sovereignty”. Kim had invited other diplomats into North Korea before, including former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to discuss the nuclear weapons program. The visits were highly choreographed, theatrical affairs, and usually include a special Arirang performance. Now, however, Kim extended his “going on progress” tours to the world beyond the North Korean borders. While he is only known to personally have visited the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Kim just waited for the world to

\(^9\)President Bush (2002): State of the Union address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DqHyIcsO8E [retrieved on 22\(^\text{nd}\) March 2013]
come to him. (Medlicott 2005: 73) This was the moment when North Korea's theatrical negotiation strategy – alternating between a hard and a soft line to force the other parties to comply – became fully apparent. On the one hand, Kim represented a potentially terrorist state, with the technology to develop weapons of mass destruction. On the other hand, the “Dear Leader” went out of his way to greet the world. He was turning into the visual representation of North Korea, and portrayed the DPRK as both a global player that was not only to be taken seriously, but could also show a “human side”, as difficult as this side may be to see for Western observers. “Dictators come in different strains, like poisons.” Peter Maass wrote in a New York Times article on the Kimist regime (2003). Kim knew to be courteous, intelligent, and was indeed very well informed about what the world thought of him. (Maas 2003: n.p.) He dramatized the suspicion and anxiety he struck in the international society, just like he utilized the admiration and fear he evoked in his own country. While being very aware of the fact that his people were starving, Kim reportedly answered the question why the state would put its scarce resources into the development of missiles instead of social and humanitarian programmes that would be more beneficial to the people by explaining he needed the missiles simply so the U.S. would talk to him. (Maas 2003: n.p.) But not only hostility plays a role in the negotiation, also the above mentioned “human side” does. When in 2009, two American journalists who crossed the border from China by the Tumen river were arrested for illegal entry and sentenced to twelve years hard labour, Kim Jong-il agreed to pardon them if former U.S. President Clinton came to P'yŏngyang to take them back to the United States.¹⁰ (cf. Oh, Hassig 2012: 93) Kim Jong-il used the journalists as a kind of collateral, or even a prop, which he used in exchange for the attention of the international society – especially that of the USA – while portraying himself as a benevolent leader to his own people.

After the death of his father in 2011, Kim Jong-un only had a very short period of time to consolidate himself as the new leader in the Kim Il-sung tradition. His leadership is still contested, so he relies on the transfer individual charisma and authority that will allow him to command the same kind of power his father and grandfather did. Kim Jong-un therefore had to make sure not only to connect his own image to his grandfather's, but that his appearance on the scene had a dramatic aspect to it. He needed to create a political character for himself, and like his grandfather, had to burnish his charisma with military success. (cf. Lim 2012: 563) Kim Jong-un almost immediately began to promote an aggressive policy towards the West, in order to write himself a role for the international stage. The youngest Kim wanted to prove that, despite his youth and political inexperience, he was able to rule in the Kimist tradition – by achieving the routinization of

revolutionary charisma, and by communicating this process not only to his own people, but also to the outside world. In order to analyse how the DPRK consciously creates its external image, the use of global – especially typically Western – media platforms will now be looked at.

5.2 The DPRK and global media platforms

The North Korean government seems to be having a very clear understanding of how the Western media works, and how it wants to be portrayed in it. Next to its official website koreadpr.com, the country further runs Uriminzokkiri\(^{11}\), which translates to “our nation”, a web portal that offers “news” from the DPRK's central news agency (KCNA). The site also distributes information via Twitter, Facebook and Flickr. Further, Uriminzokkiri has its own Youtube channel\(^{12}\), for the extended distribution of reports and propaganda. At the time of writing, 5,828 clips can be watched on the channel, many of them are either hailing the great North Korean nation (its army, its workers and industry, as well as the beauty of its nature) or condemning the imperialist enemy (namely the ROK, Japan, and of course the United States). The videos are made in a fashion that doesn't necessarily require an understanding of the Korean language, the imagery speaks for itself. At the moment, the DPRK regularly submits entries to its ongoing “propaganda film festival”, to go with the regime's aggressive rhetoric. Videos showing the White House in ashes or the explosion of the U.S. capitol building can be found. On March 21\(^{st}\) 2013, a film titled “A Short, Three-Day War” was uploaded, showing the fictional invasion of the ROK by North Korean troops, in which 150,000 American citizens are claimed to have been taken as hostage. (Der Standard 22\(^{nd}\) March 2013). In February 2013, to accompany the latest missile test, a bizarre video was uploaded, showing a dream sequence of a North Korean citizen that imagines the nuclear destruction of a U.S. city that resembled New York. The soundtrack to the clip was an instrumental version of “We are the World”. The attack scenes appeared to be from the video game “Modern Warfare 3”. The video was eventually removed from Youtube. These propaganda videos were clearly intended for the outside world, as in 2013, only a few hundred North Koreans (mostly members of the party elite) have access to the internet. (cf. Lankov 2007: 57pp)

The Youtube channel exists since 2010. It is not known what knowledge Kim Jong-un personally has of computers and the internet, but if it is true that he has lived in Europe, it can be assumed that he has a fair understanding how new media platforms like Twitter and Youtube work, and that he supported the creation of the channel. (cf. Interview Rüdiger Frank, Der Standard 3\(^{rd}\) January 2013)

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The Kimist government uses the internet not only to inform foreign governments of its intentions and to announce missile tests, but also to communicate with the global public. The way the aggressive military potential is portrayed strongly suggests that the videos are made to strike fear of an attack in people. Since the quality of the videos isn't up to Western standards (which doesn't convince of the technical advance of the DPRK), the content often comes across in a perplexing and bemusing way – but suspicion is created, which catches attention. Currently, the Uriminzokkiri channel has a total of about 6 Million views. Western journalists and other media outlets observe Uriminzokkiri on Twitter\(^\text{13}\), and, in light of the currently ongoing threats of the regime, report regularly on new developments.

While the social media and online portals of the DPRK are very much intended to draw an audience, another aspect of the country that was up until now carefully guarded recently became slightly more public: maps of North Korea. There were almost no detailed satellite images available to the public for a long time, only rather uninformative maps. In early 2013, Google first made more detailed maps of the DPRK accessible. The material used in creating the maps was collected for many years by hobby cartographers visiting the country, so Jayanth Mysore, the responsible Senior Product Manager at Google Maps explained.\(^\text{14}\) Now hospitals, schools, parks and subway stations of P’yŏngyang are visible.

The world around the capital is a lot less detailed, and remains largely unmapped – save for a few other big cities and airports, a few chemical plants and the Yongbyon nuclear test facility. There is a reason why North Korea has only now been cartographically tapped into, and why there still is wide uncharted territory – and this reason shows on the new Google maps. In the satellite view, several greyed out areas almost the size of cities can be found in remote mountain areas. These areas are labelled concentration camps. An example would be the Labor Camp 22, North Hamgyong.

The West has known of the existence of prison labour camps in North Korea from accounts given by defectors. Some of those who managed to flee the DPRK, an estimated total of 25.000 people in the past ten years, not only managed to flee the country, but the camps as well. These former prisoners have come forward with their stories. *The Aquariums of P’yŏngyang* (2001) by Kang Chol-Hwan is perhaps the most striking memoir of a former North Korean prisoner. The information defectors have is the only weapon they can use against the regime. There exist no photographs or footage of the camps, only drawings made by those who managed to escape. (Cohen 2013: n.p.) Foreign visitors are naturally not allowed to see the camps, nor are they allowed to even

\(^{13}\) Uriminzokkiri on Twitter (2013): https://twitter.com/uriminzok_en (available in english)
\(^{14}\) Jayanth Mysore (28th January 2013): http://google-latlong.blogspot.co.at/2013/01/publishing-more-detailed-maps-of-north.html [retrieved on 26th March 2013]
mention them. Located in very remote regions, access to them is barred to foreign non-governmental organisations and humanitarian groups. These prison camps, as well as other everyday practices of the Kimist regime qualify as human rights violations and even as crimes against humanity, but North Korea has been hiding its crimes well. An independent analysis is impossible, as no one can "assess fully human rights conditions or confirm reported abuses." (US Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, DPRK: 2011: 23) Between 100,000 and 200,000 people are estimated to currently be imprisoned in labour camps, with very little chance of ever getting out again. (Der Standard 29th January 2013)

The North Korean regime has a clear idea of what information it wants to send out, and what things to keep hidden. The United Nations hoped for an improvement of the situation when Kim Jong-un became the leader, but any opening towards the United Nations concerning the matter of human rights would weaken the information monopoly and the repression apparatus. These are vital elements that keep the regime upright, and cannot be jeopardized during the second hereditary succession. However, the reports by former prisoners and other defectors find increasing attention in international media, especially in the light of the aggressive rhetoric of Kim Jong-un. Also, putting prison camps on maps raises their visibility – even more so that they are greyed out. The lack of insight is still a serious hindrance, but governmental support for the UN commission of inquiry is now significantly growing. In 2012, the annual human rights resolution concerning the DPRK was adopted by consensus. It is not easy to predict when or how change will come, but by bringing down the information wall North Korea has skilfully built around itself and expose its human rights violations change may be fostered. (Cohen 2013: n.p.)

5.3 The interpretation of North Korea in Western Media

Theatre, writes Joseph Nye, is a competition for audience. (2011: 121) No dramaturgy, no use of symbols, no public presentation will work if the target audience doesn't respond to it. The spectacle, whether on the domestic or the international scene, is interdependency. Conditions become problems or opportunities, and actors become leaders or enemies, if a sizeable part of the spectators accepts it as such. Audience attention to certain issues is likely to be ephemeral though, and depends on how these issues are portrayed in the news reports. “[News] construct the social reality to which people respond and help construct the subjectivity of actors and spectators as well; in the process, they reinforce established power structures and value hierarchies.” (Edelmann 1988: 34)

The preceding chapter substantiated the argument that the DPRK has a very clear idea of how it wants to act on the global stage and how it chooses to communicate its performance to the outside world – even if it cannot control every impression it leaves. The following section aims to show
how the “international theatre” is interpreted by its audience – the international society. For this purpose, photographs of North Korea, the North Korean people and its leaders in Western media will be analysed, to show how the nation is imagined in international politics. For the outside world, photographs of North Korea play an important role for the creation of an identity – both of the own, Western one, and that of the corresponding “other”. Images, especially in respect to the contemporary transnational interconnectedness, allow for particular kinds of seeing, and thereby shape realities. Self-identity needs an external force to determine itself. (Shim, Nabers 2011: 7)

Photographs (as well as video recordings) are a principal way of bringing news from distant places home, but are inevitably transformative of meaning. Images only provided glimpses of reality; they are both selective and reductive. Photography and imagery, especially connected to news reports, create a particular world view, which can become dominant or hegemonic. (Shim, Nabers 2011: 8) Pictures are translated into metonymies and metaphors, and subsequently become symbolic. This implies that often stereotypes are created.

5.3.1 North Korea as “the other”

The 1990ies have been a defining period for interpretations of North Korea based on photographs, but this trend persists until today. The first news reports about something other than the DPRK's nuclear programme were dealing with an equally problematic issue: the failing economy, the natural disasters and the resulting famine. On 17th February 1999, the BBC news published an article about millions of people dead from starvation15, and used the picture of a severely malnourished child to accompany the text. On 22nd September 2009, ten years later, a photo series titled “In pictures: Life in poverty-stricken North Korea” was posted.16 The imagery is much the same, dominated by photographs of underdeveloped infants, people in hospitals lacking medication, and farmers toiling in barren looking fields. A slightly more diverse gallery was created by photographer Christopher Morris for TIME Magazine, called “Exposing North Korea” (2005)17. Morris provided pictures that document the carefully planned tour every visitor of North Korea gets to take part in. What is made almost invisible to the Western audience is the representation of smiling or happy North Koreans. Tomas van Houtryve's photo essay ”The Land of No Smiles”18 published in Foreign Policy (2009) is indicative of this visual frame.

If “North Korea” is typed into Google image search, another dominating visual representation of

the North Korean people becomes apparent. A large proportion of search results show photographs of crowds in the DPRK, often in a military context. These images reinforce the Western view of North Koreans as a threatening, robot-like mass, in which the individual has no place whatsoever. All these photo series and news reports consist of similar imagery. They show representational patterns and key visual themes of Western news reporting on the DPRK: backwardness, bleakness, madness, dangerousness, isolation, poverty, scarcity and weakness.

Shim and Nabers point out that the representation of North Korea as either a menace or a weak, if not failed state, are the two dominant ways of portraying the country in Western media. Photographs of militarized, or sick, unhappy looking people in a cheerless environment have a "personal code" inscribed that can have a depoliticising effect. The partial content shown in photographs (e.g. malnourished infants, army troops) assumes the legitimate interpretation of the whole (the nation), thereby revealing the hegemonic mode of the image. Photographs of this kind reduce complexity. They are more likely to evoke feelings of fear and pity than compassion on the part of the viewers, providing them with the knowledge that the reality shown in the photographs is not theirs. The viewer’s identity is substantiated through such imagery. (“North Korea is a place of suffering. North Korea is a threat to us. We are not North Korea.”). (Shim, Nabers 2011: 16, 17)

5.3.2 Photographs of the Kims

Another “trend” in the visual representation of North Korea is the strategic use of photographs of the leaders. Not only are the leaders' images important visuals for the people of North Korea, also to the outside world it has become representative of the nation as a whole. A very formative representation of Kim Jong-il in Europe was the 7/2005 edition of Der Spiegel, a German weekly news magazine, that dedicated a large section of the issue to North Korea. On the cover a smiling Kim Jong-il is shown, in the background a rocket, an exploding bomb and fireworks. The most striking thing however is the title of the issue: “A lunatic with a bomb. Nuclear power North Korea.” [Der Irre mit der Bombe. Atommacht Nordkorea]. This Spiegel headline was often quoted in international media. Notably, the corresponding article itself doesn't just deal with Kim or paint him as insane, but actually tries to provide a broad overview of political, social and economic conditions in the country, and highlights different power actors. The cover and title however appear provocatively one-sided. The image of Kim was used to depict the nation as a whole, and all power groups in the country are tied up in the personage of the leader. Spiegel issue 15/2013 features a similarly polemic cover, titled “Kim Jong Boom. North Korea's insane nuclear warrior.” [Kim Jong

19 Der Spiegel 7/2005: http://www.flickr.com/photos/95068522@N07/8662032413/in/photostream
Bumm. Nordkoreas verrückter Atomkrieger.] showing Kim Jong-un astride a rocket.  

This trend of using photographs of the leader interchangeably with the nation as a whole was reinforced in 2008 by the DPRK itself, when the government started to release more and more photographs of Kim Jong-il “going on progress” around the country and performing his duty as leader, to counter rumours of his deteriorating health.

When after Jong-il’s death in 2011 his son Jong-un was announced the successor, he wasn’t exactly what had been expected, due to his youth and inexperience, but after a while it became clear why he had been chosen over his brothers and sister. He strongly resembled his grandfather II-sung. Side-by-side pictures of the two were printed right away to underline their similarities. Jong-un made a conscious decision to adopt a strategy slightly different from his father’s – he immediately started to hold public speeches. Judging by his posture, gestures, pronunciation and facial expressions, he seems to have studied his grandfather’s way of speaking to mimic it as closely as possible.

One of the first photographs of Jong-un that reached the West showed him riding a horse while inspecting troops – a self-portrayal that had been chosen before by both his father and grandfather. Surprisingly, Kim Jong-un also chose to appear in public in company of his wife, singer Ri Sol-ju – something his father and grandfather never did, despite the significant form of “worship” the mothers of the Kim clan were subjected to. These two different images seem to have been chosen consciously. The photograph of Kim on a horse was to show his involvement in the military and him displaying the same grandeur his almost deified grandfather had, but was received with bemusement in the West. The pictures of Kim and his wife on the other hand seemed almost positive, as they made him appear like a modern family man. This went well in combination with his speeches that promised change to come. However, the most famous picture of North Korea’s new leader is probably that of him at an army base at the demilitarized zone, looking into South Korea with binoculars. This photograph was also chosen by TIME Magazine, who named Kim Jong-un one of the most influential people of 2013.

Photographs can function as visuals of hegemony. (Shin, Nabers 2011: 10) Recording the reality of people and places in a specific, defining moment forms interpretations, identities and meanings, since imagery suggest to us who people in the “other” are and how they live. This section aimed to show the often black-and-white representation of North Korea in Western media: as a weak and fragile country; or as a danger to, and outcast of, the international community. In light of these contradictions and perhaps misunderstandings, this chapter can be seen as an effort to think anew.

20 Der Spiegel 15/2013: http://www.flickr.com/photos/95068522@N07/8662044165/in/photostream
21 Kim Jong-un and Kim II-sung: http://www.flickr.com/photos/95068522@N07/8662874844/in/photostream
22 Kim Jong-un's new year's speech can be viewed here (in Korean): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPHR6mjp0 [retrieved on 19th April 2013]
23 The 2013 TIME 100: http://time100.time.com/2013/04/18/time-100/slide/kim-jong-un/ [retrieved on 19th April 2013]
about cultural “others”, outsiders and states that are too easily categorised as failed, or a menace.

In the next section, an analysis of how North Korea and the interpretations that exist of it influence hegemony and preponderance in the region will follow. A contrasting presentation of the neorealist and the post-structuralist approach to the matter will be provided.
6. North Korea as a regional linchpin in the constitution of hegemony

6.1 Neorealist and post-structuralist views on hegemony

In this thesis, hegemony is fundamentally defined as a specific type of rule based on the ability of a state to present its own interests as relevant and beneficial to others. The culture and ideology of the preponderant state become a way of life for most other actors in its sphere of influence. Generally, hegemony is not created through coercion, but through compromise and social consensus. (Brand 2007: 264) Every current of thought in international relations theory has its own explanation for the creation of hegemony and related power diffusions though. The neorealist and post-structuralist approaches to the matter are outlined below.

The neorealist current, dominating the analysis of North Korea and its foreign politics, characterises actors (= states) a priori. It thereby deliberately ignores real actor characteristics and regards states in an a-historical fashion. Every state is identified as the same type of entity, differences are only found in material capabilities, measured in GNP and military power. Only a few prime players in international politics (great powers) are identified, and in relation to these actors, the structure of the international system is determined. In turn, the likely behaviour of these prime players in changing settings is deduced by conceptualizing varying polarities. (Jørgensen 2010: 84) The international system is therefore anarchic, and always has been since the beginning of modernity – when confronted with a more powerful state, actors build up their own capabilities to defend themselves if need be. (Allison, Zelikov 1999: 31) Neorealism is not a theory of foreign policy per se, but as a systemic theory its aim is to explain how states operate in a given setting of power diffusion. Thus, it explains different kinds of state behaviour, such as balancing, bandwagoning and seeking relative or absolute gains. “No matter which kind of behaviour, it will always be explained by systemic structural factors, that is, strategically by changing polarities and, tactically or operationally, by balance of power theory.” (Jørgensen 2010: 85) This view of state relations determines the neorealist perspective on hegemony as well. It defines hegemony as material (meaning military) preponderance, and disregards historical and cultural influences on state relations, as well as levels of analysis other than that of nation-states. Norms play no paramount role in the international system, pragmatics do. Changing distribution of power capabilities are seen as caused by changing configurations of polarity (whether it is one, two, or more great powers dominating the international society). (Prys 2010: 488)

In accordance with the theatre state concept and the political media spectacle analysis, a post-
structuralist alternative to analysing North Korea’s role in the international society will be proposed here. Post-structuralism in international relations is a current of thought born out of critical opposition to more mainstream theories such as neorealism, and reflects on the sources of knowledge creation in international relations. “We probably know more about the world as conceptualized by journalists than by professional I[nternational] R[elations] scholars.” writes Knud Erik Jørgensen about the possession of abstract knowledge. (2010: 165) This applies significantly to North Korea, and the reality the international society conceives of this state.

While states function as the dominant units of analysis in post-structuralism as well, a multi-dimensional understanding of power is implied. The central theme of post-structuralism is that of the creation and use of knowledge through linguistics and culture as the basis for power and dominance. Next to this, the themes of identity, representation and interpretation are paramount elements in this current of thought. (Jørgensen 2010: 165) It is the way a state communicates its ideology and interests, and how the audience reacts to them, that determines its success. Within post-structuralism, the representation of the own identity is understood in symbolic and metaphorical terms. (Jørgensen 2010: 166) Hegemony is hence not simply seen as an elaborate way of executing power over others, but more as a wide acceptance of existing social structures through various communicative and ideological mechanisms. (Brand 2007: 264) James Scott further defines hegemony in a post-structuralist view as a critical economy of signs in (and as) a field of political struggle. It refers to the social effects of a dominant group's appropriation of the external signs of others in its reach. (Scott 1990: 200 pp; Greenhouse 2005: 359)

This approach will now be applied to North Korea, in order to show how its “economy of signs” shapes the creation of knowledge, and how this in turn influences distributions of power. The regional level, as opposed to the global level used in neorealist analysis, will be used here as an analytical platform, to highlight how sublevel diffusions of hegemony are influenced by the DPRK’s theatre state.

6.2 Northeast Asia: regional dynamics

A geopolitical region is defined as consisting of two or more member states in geographical proximity that are characterized by regular interactions, and are perceived by both internal and external actors as a distinct regional space. (Prys 2010: 485) Regional power, albeit very much embedded in and defined by the international preponderance of the United States, is a variable that can take on different forms and values. The USA, even if it is identified here as the global hegemon, isn't the only state influencing (and being influenced by) the DPRK. The neighbouring actors play significant roles as well.
Northeast Asia is here defined as a region consisting of China, the Korean Peninsula, Japan and the Russian Far East \(^{24}\). Historically, these states are tightly interwoven, but today display fundamentally different types of statehood and economies, which can at times cause frictions. Further, the location of North Korea in the heart of the region turns the area into a unique geopolitical hotspot. The DPRK’s spectacle interactively determines its audience.

Two of the most important actors in the Northeast Asian region will be analysed from a post-structuralist perspective in the successive section, in order to highlight aspects of identity and knowledge creation. First, a look at the role of the Republic of Korea will be taken, then, as somewhat of a counter-pole, the effects of the PRC shall be analysed. This is to show how the DPRK and its interpretations function as a marker and discursive linchpin in the area, that parts ways but also allows new alliances to form amongst the members of its “audience”.

6.2.1 South Korea

The Republic of Korea inherited the same strained sense of sovereignty, the same cultural heritage influenced by Confucian values and suffered the same trauma caused by the national division as its northern half. The desire to reunify the peninsula exists within the ROK, but is, for various reasons, not very actively pursued.\(^ {25}\) Andrei Lankov constructs an argument about how the South Korean elite, terrified by lessons of German unification, is keeping the DPRK afloat for the ROK’s own sake – and money. (Lankov 2007: 2) Indeed, a collapse of North Korea could lead to mass migration, instability and perhaps even war – effects no state in the region is willing to deal with. (Hagström 2006: 393)

While North Korea created itself a national identity out of its brand of State-socialism and its pursuit of unification, the Republic of Korea found its base in opposing itself to its northern counterpart – its ideological, economic and political other. The South reacts to the spectacle that is put on by the North, and shapes its own identity in accordance with – or rather, in opposition to – the imagery that is delivered. This process of dissociation manifests itself in media reports that paint the DPRK as alien, mysterious and hostile, as well as in public festivities. When in February 2013, the ROK celebrated the inauguration of its first female president Park Geun-he in a pompous

\(^{24}\) This definition of the Northeast Asian region has been chosen to fit the frames of this thesis. In other conceptions, Mongolia and Taiwan are counted as part of the region as well. (Council on Foreign Relations 2013)

\(^{25}\) The ROK went through tumultuous periods in the 20th century – a historical process that lead to democratisation and the development of one of the world's strongest economies in the 1980ies. South Korea is regarded a post-industrial state, and is currently the 13th wealthiest country in the world. The ROK had a GDP (PPP) of 1,611 trillion U.S. Dollar in 2012. In comparison the DPRK was estimated to have a GDP (PPP) of about 40 billion U.S. Dollar in 2011. (CIA Factbook 2013)
manner, on the same day the DPRK effusively awarded hundreds of scientists, engineers and workers who contributed to the nuclear programme with the title “Hero of the DPRK”. John Erling summed both events up as follows: “The antagonistic brother-states of the Korean peninsula order their people to cheer.” (Erling 2013: n.p.) Self-dissociation is carried out discursively and ceremoniously.

The ROK dealt in different ways with the continuous North Korean issues. In respect to the experience of the Korean War it isn’t surprising direct confrontation was avoided. One of the most pro-active steps the ROK took towards the DPRK was the “Sunshine Policy”, initiated by South Korean president Kim Dae-jung in 1998. This group of policies included the South actively seeking cooperation of with the North. However, no form of armed provocation was to be tolerated. The highlights of the policy were the two Korean summits in 2000 and 2007, when not only Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung met, but also families separated by the war were allowed to briefly reunite again. (cf. Buzo 2002: 174 pp) The policy came to an end in 2008, due to the DPRK's nuclear tests and provocative behaviour.

In face of the threatening Kimist regime, the ROK found a viable ally in the United States. A shared “other” was a common ground for establishing bilateral agreements. Military confrontation was still undesirable, therefore South Korea sought dialogue – and urged the United States to do the same. This influenced the U.S. to pursue the Agreement Framework to regulate the nuclear issue in 1994, and later on the Six-Party-Talks. Now, in face of Kim Jong-un's aggressive rhetoric and the factor of uncertainty he represents, the ROK once again had to lean on U.S. for support, who began to strengthen its military presence in South Korea. (Military Balance Asia 2013)

The USA gave its ally South Korea the status of a “linchpin” in the region. It was attested this particular title because of its strategic position – and its identity as the antipode of North Korea. The ROK profits from its bilateral relationships with Washington on a material level, and at the same time serves as a launchpad for U.S. interests. (Katz, Cha 2012: 52) In the past, it was Japan that had been regarded as the closest ally to the U.S. in the region, as it lacks relevant military power of its own and is often seen as dependent. Linus Hagström however argues that Japan executes power in a different way, seeking more independence from the U.S. by applying its significant economic, civilian and soft power. (Hagström 2006: 402) The shared “enemy” North Korea led Japan and the ROK to side with each other, despite their own troubled history. While the ROK is not to be mistaken for a “puppet of the U.S.” either, and indeed aims for more independence as well, it currently makes for a better launch pad for the USA in the region. (Tatsumi 2013: n.p.)

Analysing the situation from a purely neorealist perspective would imply the conclusion that the ROK is simply defending its own sovereignty in face of North Korean aggressions and growing power capabilities. However, the post-structuralist perspective highlights South Korea’s identity in
contrast to its Northern half, and the establishment of power through the (lack of) knowledge both states have about each other.

6.2.2 The People's Republic of China

The other kind of actor in the arena is China. Historically, the PRC and the DPRK have been united in close alliance, despite ideological differences and diverging internal developments. (cf. Frank 2009, Armstrong 2004) The relationship is not one-sided though. The PRC may be North Korea's life-line concerning oil and food aid, and functions as its protector in the international realm, but China profits just as much from the DPRK. Not only is it convenient to have another “Communist” state in its neighbourhood, the continuity of the Kimist regime is essential to peace and stability in the Northeast Asian region – prerequisites for China's economic growth. (Song 2011: 1136) Immediately following the DPRK's third nuclear test in February 2013 however, Chinese media became exceedingly critical – that is as critical as censored media gets. People voiced their frustration about the North Korean provocations online, even punishment was demanded. The government was almost forced to listen, and show that it disapproves of the regime's actions. This is remarkable, as even after the nuclear test in 2009, the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG) led by Hu Jintao decided that it would view “the North's nuclear program as separate from the Sino-DPRK partnership.” (Jun 2013: n.p.) The Chinese government only reacts actively to North Korean provocations if the stability of the Kimist regime itself could be endangered, or a U.S. military response could be triggered. The DPRK serves as a buffer to the PRC, both against South Korea and Japan, and is crucial to the integrity of China's northern border. North Korea is needed to prevent hostile foreign powers from using the peninsula as a launchpad for invasion or to weaken China's position in the region. Considering how strained the reaction to Kim Jong-un's attempt to perform power was, China may have to evolve this one-dimensional policy. Turning a blind eye to the nuclear issue or protecting the DPRK from international pressure may not be the right way to preserve stability in the region any longer. The discrepancies in rhetoric are becoming too apparent, and a major policy shift is demanded by citizens, the media and the international society. (Song 2011: 1154)

Indeed, after the February 2013 test, the world turned towards China, as it is perhaps the actor with the most influence in the given situation. The PRC, after all, is hosting the Six-Party-Talks about the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and supports the DPRK in material terms. The Chinese government had to openly condemn the strategies pursued by the new leadership, even if it argued that it understood the DPRK's need for self-protection. (Jun 2013: n.p.) The potential instability of the Korean peninsula also gives the PRC bargaining power and importance. The
Chinese government appears to be exploiting the North Korean threat, in order to reinforce its own power within the Northeast Asian region – it can be utilized at times like a prop in a spectacle aimed at the creation of fear and suspicion. The DPRK is an instrument to weaken the preponderance of the United States – and therefore an important tool for Chinese foreign policies. (Wit, Town 2013: n.p.; Jun 2013: n.p.)

The neorealist approach defines the antipole of hegemony as no power at all, while the post-positivist tradition of post-structuralism concedes to the existence both sublevel hegemons and counter-hegemonic forces. (Prys 2010: 488) According to Prys, a regional hegemon doesn't necessarily provide public goods, nor does it always have the will or the opportunity to influence the states in its area. It emerges from specific power constellations and combines in itself a certain set of signs partially found in other regional actors as well. (Prys 2010: 479)

The People's Republic of China is considered to possess the ideological and material potential needed to take the position of the regional hegemon. (Godwin 2004: 81) It indeed commands power that is on par with that of South Korea and Japan, and perhaps even the United States. However, it is North Korea and the reactions its spectacles elicit – along with the knowledge about it that is established by the media – that contribute to the diffusion of power and hence China's specific position. The DPRK does not function as an “other” to the PRC, nor as an enemy, but as an instrument for securing the own legitimacy based on continuous growth. The Chinese government recognizes the Kimist regime as a kind of counter-hegemonic force that balances U.S. power and influence in the region. While the PRC may be considered the preponderant state in the region, maybe even its hegemon, North Korea is its linchpin. (Katz, Cha 2012: 52; Hagström 2006: 402)

The DPRK and the interpretations of its identity create a specific catalogue of signs that enables certain power relations to form. While South Korea and Japan either sought more support or more independence from the global hegemon United States, both countries chose a similar way of discussing the North Korean spectacle. Hence they sided with one another against a common enemy figure. China, on the other hand, knows how to use the DPRK to demonstrate its own power, and hold U.S. influences in the Northeast Asian region at bay.

In an interdependent performance, the spectacle and its corresponding audience create specific diffusions of power. Thereby, the North Korean theatre state gives the Northeast Asian region its unique character as a geopolitical hotspot. North Korea is therefore more than an isolated dictatorship, or a “hermit kingdom”. It is a state that both directly and indirectly influences (and is influenced by) its environment, and thereby becomes a linchpin in the Northeast Asian region. The DPRK has been subjected to change, good and bad, for the past decade – a process that has culminated in Kim Jong-un's coming to power. “Those changes have important implications for the Korean peninsula, the East Asian region and the international community.” (Wit 2013: n.p.)

7. Conclusion

On 7th May 2013, three months after the nuclear test that caused international tensions and a flood of news stories to erupt, the DPRK reportedly dismantled two medium-range ballistic missiles positioned on its east coast. The U.S. Pentagon welcomed this move as a “provocation pause”, and a positive development. (Der Standard 7th May 2013) It is still unclear if this indeed points to Kim Jong-un's government backing down, but in face of the North Korean history of provocation and concession, it appears to be another strategic retreat in order to influence multilateral negotiations. While the past few weeks may have caused global instability and concern, on the domestic level Kim Jong-un's “performance of power” may have been the way to stabilize the legitimacy of his authority. The spectacle of imminence and staginess is not likely to be over, and the suspiciousness towards the DPRK remains.

The international society still struggles to make sense of North Korea's seemingly irrational actions and its mystical appearance as a "hermit kingdom". As one of the most sanctioned states in the world, the DPRK appears anachronistic and contrary to modern revolutionary tradition, continuing despite tragic moral and economic failure. No other comparable type of state has managed to undergo a hereditary succession of leadership two times in a row, while faced with similarly adverse conditions.

This thesis, written in the course of spring 2013, attempts to contribute to a re-evaluation of the DPRK’s statehood, leadership and society. Within the frames of the argumentation pursued here, North Korea was preliminarily defined as “a hereditary, state-socialist dictatorship – a totalitarian partisan state characterised by revolutionary authority and a culture-specific, ethnic nationalism.” This definition is widely accepted, and was in this thesis not disproved. The DPRK is all that, but it is more. A different approach was chosen, considering that the definition above is only descriptive of North Korean statehood, and doesn't enable an analysis of the particularities found in its deeper nature. The DPRK was a vital, involved part of the “Second World” during the times of the Cold War, and was affected by changes that took place in the political realms around it. The fact that it survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, the market liberalisation of China, the precedent bureaucratisation of authorities, the death of its own glorified leader and its severe economic troubles cannot be fully explained by pure isolationism and other common explanations.

The North Korean state takes pride in its self-made accomplishments as a revolutionary polity that managed to resist the developments that took place in other state-socialist entities of the Cold
War era. The main argument of this thesis is that North Korea achieved this continuity of revolutionary character and charismatic authority by turning itself into a kind of theatre state. It was Clifford Geertz who argued that a state may be created on the basis of an enchanting display, rather than a rational exercise of power. (cf. Geertz 1980) In combination with Max Weber's notion of the “routinization of charisma”, this implies that a conscious choice was made by the political leadership of the DPRK to create such a display and to mystify authority in order to preserve its own hierarchy. Spectacles, dramatizations and rites are instruments used by any modern state. However, in the case of North Korea, which is confronted with a strained sense of sovereignty and a rupture in the national narrative, theatrics and symbols were made to play a much more determining role. (cf. Medlicott 2005: 71) By mobilizing history, religious myths and cultural productions, the Kims managed to create and communicate a narrative that was not only that of the state, but also their own. Especially Kim Jong-il knew how to use the artistic talents he possessed, in order to dramatize the Ch’uche idea, as well as Korean cultural and historical heritage as a basis for legitimacy. In a purely theoretical sense, this achievement goes against the impermanent nature of charismatic power. However, by realizing what the process of De-Stalinization had implied for the leadership in the USSR, the regime consciously detached certain aspects of charismatic authority from the individual leader (namely Kim Il-sung), and turned it into a hereditary institution – much like in an absolute monarchy. This would normally imply that authority eventually becomes “traditional”. By keeping the rupture that originally caused the charismatic authority to emerge alive – in the North Korean case this means the experience of national division and guerrilla warfare involving the civilian population – this process was significantly decelerated. In 2013, Kim Jong-un used exactly this idea of “defending” the DPRK’s sovereignty against its enemies and demonstrating dominance towards the Southern part of the peninsula to revitalize his grandfather’s charismatic authority. The cult around the leader is hence not a cult of personality per se, rather it is a particular form of resistance to historical trends of rationalization of political rule. It is a form of crisis management. (cf. Kwon, Chung 2012: 144)

This story of success is at the same time that of great failure. ”While driving itself to turn into a theatre state with the determination to battle against the natural morality of charisma armed with a man-made, magnified, and mass-mobilized politics of art, the state of North Korea became increasingly alienated from the telos of its foundation, which was, like that of other revolutionary postcolonial states, to build a politically independent, yet socially democratic and economically prosperous community.” (Kwon, Chung 2012: 189) The principles of socialist revolution were subverted in North Korea, and replaced by the Ch’uche idea that came with the extreme centralization of political and executive power, as well as high military mobilization. This in turn caused a growing ineptitude of the state in the sphere of economic substance and growth, which
resulted in the crisis of the mid-1990ies.

The second part of the research question pursued in this thesis asks about the nature of the "international spectacle" that is put on by the North Korean regime. Interestingly, little is written about the way theatre states construct their foreign policies. This appears paradoxical, as theatre demands an audience to function. This applies very much to the specific case of North Korea. By developing spectacles and enchanting performances the DPRK did not only create an identity for itself, but in correlation, an external, international identity was created as well. Its role as one of the last revolutionary polities, the nuclear spectacle, news reports, cultural productions and aggressive rhetoric aren't just intended for the national population. They are communicated via global media platforms to the international public as well, and fulfil the same purpose of reproducing society and the authority attached to it. Therefore, the lines between the spectacle directed at the domestic audience and the one directed internationally blur often times. Not only does North Korea strive to secure itself a place in the world as a sovereign and independent entity, it needs this place to represent its right to legitimacy to its own people. By becoming an enemy figure to its main ideological antagonist, the United States, the DPRK attained a more profound presence in international politics and secured power internally. Through the use of media platforms like twitter and Youtube, the regime communicates the spectacle to its audience. Not all impulses that come out of North Korea are controlled, but they all add up to the interpretation the international audience has of the North Korean spectacle. The DPRK not only established its statehood and evaded trends found in almost all other revolutionary polities because of the specific conditions the regime created in the national society, but also because of the way it interacts with the international audience. The formation of an identity and the establishment of an original place in the international society are multi-dimensional and fluid processes.

This relates to the question of how the "international audience" interprets the spectacle that is performed. The suspicion and fear created by North Korea keep the country in the spotlight of international media: as a menace, cultural other or a failed state. Indeed, it is largely media and journalists that shape the Western view of North Korea. Similar trends are reflected in the academic discourse, which either analyses North Korea as a security situation or a cultural curiosity in the post-Cold War world. These trends are visually reinforced by both journalistic and artistic photographs of the DPRK and the Kims, that "bring home" the North Korean reality and enable it to function as "the other". (cf. Shim, Nabers 2011)

The crucial thing about self-identity is that it is status quo oriented, which means that asserting the self implies asserting the particular "other" at the same time. (Shim, Nabers 201: 23) Like any
state in the international society, North Korea exists in interdependency with others. By putting on spectacles, it contributes to a specific distribution of power on a regional and global level. In the Northeast Asian region, and in extension in relation to the United States, North Korea thereby functions as a linchpin. Bi- and multilateral conflicts and alliances are established in relation to the North Korean theatre. In turn, the power positions the DPRK helps to create also keep it in place. The Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China, the two states chosen in this thesis to highlight power relations in the region, both have interests in keeping the DPRK afloat, be it for financial, ideological or strategic reasons. The post-structuralist perspective identifies the members of the “audience” as a vital part of the performance, constellating themselves around North Korea and thereby diffusing power in the region. (cf. Lankov 2007; Song 2011)

The “international theatre state”, as proposed here as a post-structuralist concept, was used not only to give the theatre state an international perspective, but also to analyse the way the spectacle influences the formation of hegemony and related power diffusions in a specific geopolitical region. It is the neorealist perspective that is widely used to analyse the problematic security situation in Northeast Asia, but this perspective ignores real actor characteristics and doesn’t fully explain certain singularities of power diffusion in the region. It has been found in this thesis that through the application of a post-structuralist view, the identity politics in the area, as well as the creation of knowledge through media reports, could be highlighted. This complements the dominant neorealist position well by adding an alternative perspective.

The hundredth anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth in 2012 did not mark the point when the DPRK finally opened the door to becoming a “mighty, prosperous, great country”. However, it did mark the year the North Korean theatre state came full circle again and allowed for the second hereditary succession of leadership to take place. It is still uncertain whether the third-generation transfer of charismatic authority will be able to proceed in course. As mentioned, the past weeks of aggressive rhetoric and behaviour may indeed have enabled Kim Jong-un to internally stabilize his political rule, but he may well be overtaken by unforeseeable events in the future: the internal power structures commanded by party elite members of his father's generation may work to oust his position. The international pressure to comply may become too overpowering. Applying post-structuralist concepts like the “theatre state”, the “routinization of charisma”, the “political media spectacle” and “regional hegemony” complement the dominant neorealist approaches to the analysis of North Korea and its place in the world. The post-structuralist perspective highlights North Korea's multifaceted nature, and its interactions with the world external to it.
Categorizing the DPRK as a completely isolated state, a “hermit kingdom”, is therefore not accurate. While there is perhaps no other comparable state that guards its society in the same strict manner, North Korea indeed has been subjected to profound external influences. This implies that the country had to go through changes over the past decades, but at the same time was kept in the role that was attested to it. (Wit 2013: n.p.)

Other revolutionary, state-socialist entities, such as the USSR and the People's Republic of China, eventually realized that at a certain point they had reached the limits of their developmental potential, and had to change in order to move ahead. The same applies to the autocratic regimes formerly found in South Korea and Brazil. Both types of states decided to pursue political and economic opening to foster growth and stability. From a rational, economic perspective, North Korea has reached the end of its developmental potential in the mid-1990ies, when it slipped into its most severe crisis. Turning the country into a theatre state may have enabled the continuity of revolutionary polity via hereditary successions of leadership, but it also stopped the country from evolving. North Korea performs its spectacle for its own society to reproduce itself, and at the same time performs to reproduce external power relations as well. The status-quo remains. (Katz, Cha 2012: 52; Jun 2013: n.p.)

Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung argue that in any case North Korea will have to come to terms with the limits of its theatre state. The spectacle that made its continuity possible must now be realized as having a clear limit in modern history to how far a society can assert radical particularism and exceptionalism. (Kwon, Chung 2012: 190) This implies that in order to move ahead as a polity, the DPRK will have to confront its self-identity, and will most likely need another revolution.

However, the collapse of the North Korean regime has been predicted several times throughout the past two decades, but it never materialized. This is connected to the fact that revolutions tend to occur not when a government is at its most brutal, but when it wishes to liberalize itself. While North Korea had to adapt to altered conditions, it always stayed determined to keep up its hierarchy, elitist structures and the legitimacy of its authority – regardless of the costs. (Lankov 2007: 327) A popular North Korean children's song titled “We have nothing to envy in the world”26 talks about how all the world admires North Korea, its glorious leader and the estimable order he created. Will these attitudes last forever? Probably not. Information is getting into the country, through South Korean and Chinese video tapes, smuggled over the Northern border. Even if those caught watching foreign films or news reports are severely and publicly punished, any weakening of the information monopoly doesn't bode well for the regime. It is unclear which path the DPRK will be taking in the

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26 Original Korean title: Sesang-e burom opsora. (ca. 1970)
future: if they will continue as the “Kim Il-sung society” (cf. Beck 2012: 38), or follow the examples of East Germany or Romania (cf. Lankov 2007: 330), or whether they will chose a third, individual developmental way. Only time will tell.
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