

# TREASURED SWORDS: ENVIRONMENT UNDER THE BYUNGJIN LINE

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> A party apparatchik informs workers of the key tenets of the Byungjin line  
Image: *Rodong Sinmun*

The Byungjin Line, not to mention its accompanying “minaturized, lightened, diversified, and precise nukes,” is everywhere these days. And with good reason: “Byungjin” surely merits examination and reportage, for it marks a vitally important, even definitive, change of emphasis at the dawn of the Kim Jong-un era.

Within this paper I plan to delve deeper into the historical context for this new strategic line, which will support the construction of an analytical framework through which the place of the environmental in the new theorization can be determined. It is already clear that one key aspect of this is the Sepho Grassland reclamation project. Emblematic of a shift in developmental paradigms of land reclamation and rehabilitation in North Korea, Sepho is essential to the environmental narrative of the byungjinist state. Comprehending and rendering Sepho will be one key to constructing a framework for broader analysis.

But before Sepho is reached there is work to do. Just as North Korean narratives are often cohesive and encapsulatory, they can also be utterly incomprehensible without contextualisation. It would surely be impossible to engage with Sepho and the strategies of land use it may represent without this contextualizing effort. Therefore, this essay aims to establish the context for Byungjin’s

framing in developmental and environmental terms, the better to understand the place of Sepho in a North Korea under this new strategic line.

#### AMPLIFIED LEGACY: KIM JONG-UN AS HOLISTIC ENVIRONMENTALIST?

Before examining the historical context for the developmental approach in which Sepho sits, a rare opportunity has been presented to the analyst which might better lay the ground for this context. The arrival on April 27, 2012, of Kim Jong-un’s first published work, “On Effecting a Drastic Turn in Land Management to Meet the Requirements for Building a Thriving Socialist Nation,” brought with it the intriguing notion that a youthful leader would see land management as the ideal focus for his first theoretical output. However, commentators could initially do little more than note the fact of its arrival and their interest in its existence. Writing at *NK Economy Watch*, Curtis Melvin commented that the text “was not posted[,] but will no doubt be offered for sale to Pyongyang tourists before too long....”

However, this has since changed. It is rare for a full version of such a text to emerge in an accessible way, especially in English translation, but that is the case with this one, courtesy of Dermot Hudson’s Association

for the Study of Songun Politics UK. (When KCNA features an article entitled “British organization heralds the publication of Kim Il-sung/Kim Jong-il/Kim Jong-un’s work,” there is no need to read it to establish which organization is responsible.)

Kim Jong-un’s “On Bringing About a Revolutionary Turn in Land Administration with the Requirements of the Building of a Thriving Socialist Country” (“revolutionary” somehow substituted for “drastic” at some point during translation), which was seemingly presented at a meeting of senior Korean Workers Party officials on April 27, 2012, arrived as part of a push to embed the “young Generalissimo’s” authority and authenticity in a framework of posthumous hagiography of both previous leaders. Thus “President Kim Il-sung and General Kim Jong-il, peerless patriots and benevolent fathers of the people, always paid close attention to land administration and devoted painstaking efforts to developing the rivers and mountains of the country in an excellent way.”<sup>□</sup> It is apparent also that key themes from previous developmental eras still guide the text and its underlying approach, as much as the authoritative guidance of the deceased Kims: “... Land Administration is a patriotic undertaking of lasting significance for achieving the prosperity of the country and a noble undertaking for creating an excellent base of living for the people...” However, at some 19 pages long the text of Kim Jong-un’s “Land Administration” matches Kim Il-sung’s statements of the 1960s and 1970s for its extent and range, containing space not only for covering purely environmental or agricultural matters such as forest cover or agricultural output, but also reviewing policy direction on diverse issues such as tidal reclamation, road construction and urban planning, railway maintenance and aquatic resources.

What is more intriguing and distinctive about the latest document is the embedding of many of the more conservational and mitigational themes developed during the later years of Kim Jong-il’s reign: for example, “We should make good arrangements to plant trees and conserve forests to cover the country with trees and flowers.” While there are, alas, no calls to commit further to the UNFCCC process or other external environmental

agendas, the statement also connects North Korean environmental and developmental efforts with those of the wider world: “In the sector of land administration and environment conservation there are many things to be introduced from among the world trends and foreign countries’ advanced technologies...”

But more than simple restatement of these themes, which in embryonic form have appeared elsewhere in North Korean environmental narratives in recent years, within the text there appears greater evidence of a thematic change within Kim Jong-un’s conception of what nature and the environment might possibly represent or manifest in society itself, and what function it might serve in the institutional framework of a political space focused on economic capacity.

One key difference between developmental approach and theoretics between North Korea and other nations in its neighbourhood is its seeming inability to conceive of environmental or natural space as anything other than a conduit for production and capacity increases, discounting its usage within frameworks of leisure or consumption.

Yet Kim Jong-un appears not merely capable but also willing to internalise the conservational paradigm so that shared environmental space might be used and experienced by citizens and residents on its own simple terms, providing abstract value in its amenity: “... environment and nature conservation is an important and responsible undertaking to make mountains and rivers of the country more beautiful, conserve and increase natural resources, protect peoples’ health and provide them with a better living environment...”

#### TOO EARLY TO SAY: WAITING FOR MORE DATA

We need to see more publications from Kim Jong-un on environmental and developmental matters to come to any realistic conclusions, and only the briefest of reviews of his first published text is possible here. The reader will also be deprived, for the moment, of knowledge of Kim Jong-un’s thoughts on issues of moment such as railway construction or ventilation devices. However, from this section’s brief review of Kim’s potential foundational document in the field of environmental development, I



- > Planning the future of the Sepho area of Gangwon Province. All with one eye on Kim Il-sung's "Rural Theses," no doubt.  
Image: Rodong Sinmun

believe it is possible to discern an outline of the Byungjin line developmental-theoretic approach.

Of course, this is in some way an exercise in homage to the strategies of leaders Dear and Great, incorporating many of their principles and conceptions. But at the same time, Kim Jong-un's text incorporates developments from the conservational paradigm and connects environmental developments in North Korea with those of the wider world. Both of these elements ultimately allow for the conception of environmental or natural resource as a supportive "sword" of state to combine with a mitigative or environmentally protective tendency that it is possible to categorise as a "treasure."

To assess the validity and veracity for this claim to "treasured status" however and to determine whether it will be institutional capability and practice that ultimately allow for a combination in the environmental/developmental field during the era of Byungjin that begins a vital process of disconnection and reconnection of spatial form and relation from that of simple productivity and exploitation to one determined by experience and incorporation it will be necessary to investigate the roots and focus of this homage.

#### A NEW PARADIGM FOR DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH: THE RURAL THESES

"The Rural Theses on the Solution to the Rural Question," articulated by Kim Il-sung in February of 1964, are far too extensive a document to review in the course of

this essay here (a chapter in this year's "Korea Yearbook: Politics, Economy, Society," gives an extensive review of their focus and direction). To investigate Kim Jong Un's developmental framing within the Byungjin era and the place of Sepho it is, however, necessary to give a brief explication of the content. Bringing an end to the initial developmental period in North Korea, one characterized by post war reconstruction, Soviet-inspired industrial imposition and disruptive utopian application of Maoist revolutionary mass action, the "Theses" attempted the construction of a framework under which developmental projects might be undertaken. Primarily, this framework was one of coordinated political inculcation and control. Environmental management and development was to be achieved through the functioning of a new strategy for embedding ideological praxis within the rural realm:

*...the backwardness of the farm villages compared with the towns finds expression primarily in the fact that agriculture has a weaker material and technical foundation than industry; that the cultural level of the rural population is lower than that of city dwellers, and the peasants lag behind the workers in their ideological consciousness...<sup>2</sup>*

This "backwardness" and lag was to be solved via the "Three Revolutions Movement," those revolutions being

new strategic approaches to: A) technology and technical capacity; B) cultural adaptation; and C) ideological development. This aspired to enable the elimination of, "...distinctions between town and country and the class distinction between the working class and the peasantry..." as only this would allow for the building of "...socialism on a full scale..."

Such a complicated and comprehensive set of principles demanded extensive institutional reformulation, not just to allow for the level of ideological inculcation and exegesis required, but also for those technical aspects envisaged by the "Theses." The "technical" aspect was to focus on developmental elements that would become, in later years, unfortunate factors in institutional and developmental stasis and degradation, but in 1964 might have felt akin to then-UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson's "white heat of technology," a programme of rapid technical capacity increase and emphasis on state led research and development in response to the Japanese example. Agricultural and developmental practice was to be mechanized, "chemicalized", and intensified, as:

...by carrying out the technical revolution in the countryside we will achieve highly developed productive forces in agriculture, convert our socialist countryside into a solid base of food and raw materials...

Institutional approach along lines that might support such a coordinated revisioning of developmental and agricultural endeavor had been attempted before within the pomicultural (apple growing) sector, with the introduction in 1961 of the Daean Work Method, an approach to workplace and work unit management that involved daily episodes of group criticism and reflection, as well as embedding research and technical staff (as well as KWP ideological operatives) within all work settings and environments (as recounted in 1961's "On Planting Orchards Through an All-People Movement").

However, the approach laid out within the "Rural Theses" required a different set of strategies, and accordingly they were described within. The infrastructure of rural counties was to be completely reconfigured so that administrative bureaucracy within dedicated geographic areas would have the "Theses" goals as their key driver. Industry and supply systems

were to act in a similar fashion. Villages and agricultural enterprises within rural spaces were to be completely collectivized and subject to new oversight by local Party Committees and a Central Agricultural Commission.

Institutions and their bureaucracies and participants were to operate under a new planning framework in which goal setting for capacity increase was the key focus. This was combined with what may be the key surviving element from the disruptive influence of China's Great Leap Forward; between 1958 and 1960 (ending with 1960's "Year of Adjustment"), North Korea experimented with "revolutionary speed." The "Chollima Method" and "Chollima Speed" must be familiar to most observers of North Korea, but in 1964 the concept of "revolutionary urgency" was still relatively new. It had been uncontrolled before 1964, and thus institutionally difficult to manage, but the "Theses" established a place for "Chollima Riders" and "Three Revolutions Work Teams" within institutional practice, serving in theory as a sort of "turbo" button within the bureaucratic and narrative framework.

#### DOING WHAT WE ALWAYS DID: INSTITUTIONS CHALLENGED BY THE THESES

As the reader might imagine, the direction of the "Theses" proved a distinct challenge to institutions not used to such a framework. Kim Il-sung soon found himself addressing the building trade, concluding:

*...there was no uniform system to direct and control capital construction, and building operations were completely uncoordinated...<sup>3</sup>*

In May, 1964 Kim Il-sung was chastising party operatives in Chagang on issues with their management of forests:

*...Party organizations...did not accept it ideologically and they showed no inclination to carry out the task of planting trees of economic value...<sup>4</sup>*

A year later the Central Agricultural Commission itself



> “[T]he endlessly burning light of the party center”: Kim Jong-il preparing for the Sixth Party Congress of 1980.

Image: Rudiger Frank and *Japan Focus*.

fell subject to intense criticism over its mismanagement of forestry affairs:

*The Agricultural Commission is also to blame for the continued practice of tilling fire-fields. It does not exercise control over this on the grounds that it increases the area under cultivation. This is really irresponsible and absurd.<sup>5</sup>*

However, in time it seems these institutions and approaches developed a level of functionality and approach ultimately capable of meeting some of the “Theses” goals, meaning that between 1954 and 1978, under the auspices of the “technical revolution,” irrigated areas supposedly increased from some 227,000 hectares to 1.2 million hectares,<sup>6</sup> the number of cooperatives fell

from 16,000 to fewer than 4,000 (while their average size increased to some 500 hectares). The production of fertilizer also ballooned eighteen times, from a total of 259,800 tonnes in 1954 to some 4.7 million tonnes by the 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

Examining moments such as the publication and inculcation of the “Theses” in 1964 characterized by positive institutional development is of course interesting from our current perspective of studying the avowedly positivistic Sepho Grasslands Reclamation project. However it is important to bear in mind that while Sepho represents something new, “dynamic” and “vigorous,”<sup>8</sup> it also represents the seeming abandonment of one form of reclamation for another. It would therefore be useful to examine similar moments of institutional abandonment and more reductive/negative aspects with/into the North’s developmental narrative.

## FROM THE “THESES” TO THE LAND LAW OF 1977

Developmental, environmental and institutional practice following the “Theses” publication in 1964 developed quickly along the goal orientated lines set out within them. There were a myriad planning frameworks and capacity focused goals to meet within numerous agricultural and developmental sectors. Within a few years the tidal reclamation sector was aiming for some 300,000 hectares of reclamation, and the forestry and afforestation sector had been set a multitude of output targets (though not intriguingly any targets addressing overall forest cover).

However this rush to silvicultural forestry development generated disruptions similar to the industrial chaos created following the temporary incorporation of Great Leap Forward-influenced “transformational” approaches to development at the end of the 1950s, and which required 1960 to be a “year of adjustment.” However, it seems these disruptive and damaging supply issues that beset these different institutional sectors were disregarded and intense stress on increasing economically useful output was still evident on a particularly grand scale during promotion of the ‘Five Great Nature-Remaking Tasks’ associated with the First Six-Year Plan 1971-1976?

These “tasks” contributed to the formulation and generation of later targets for the agricultural and forestry sectors during the second Seven-Year Plan of 1978-1984 and thus perpetuated a developmental policy perspective purely driven by output and capacity increase. It is clear however that disruption generated by the need to constantly focus on output required new frameworks in order to contain institutional damage and to better direct developmental goals. Apparently a new legal framework addressing developmental approach and environmental impact would be required. Kim Il-sung described the need for the 1977 “Land Law” that would be this framework, in the following terms:

*Up until now our country has never had a definitive land law. The only important law concerning the land that we have is the Agrarian Reform Law*

*that was introduced immediately after liberation... but there is as yet no land law which covers land development, land conservation and land administration comprehensively.<sup>9</sup>*

This new legal framework, “The Land Law” would therefore make afforestation activity a legal obligation of the DPRK: “Afforestation is a great and far-sighted project for harnessing nature to conserve the land, make the country rich and powerful and ensure prosperity for generations to come.”

Given this legal obligation on the state itself, new institutions were also necessary and other articles asserted the role of the Land Administration and Forestry Planning Department as general overseers of woodland. The relationship of these core institutions to partner institutions in afforestation, such as educational institutions, cooperative farms and timber production units was also outlined. The “Land Law” also asserted the place of forestry as important within a context of national conservation, as forests “protect land against natural disaster and enhance the beauty of the country by creating shelter belts, anti-erosion woods, woods for recreation... and forests to safeguard watersheds.”

“The Land Law” was also combined accompanied by/with the launch of a new planning period, the “Second Seven Year Plan” described by Kim Il-sung in the following terms:

*The principal task of the Seven-Year Plan is to further strengthen the economic foundations of socialism and to raise the standard of living of the people still higher by introducing Juche, modern techniques and science into the national economy at a rapid pace.<sup>10</sup>*

This planning period, so far as the environmental sector is concerned, appears categorically less dramatic and optimistic in output and capacity terms, than earlier phases of the DPRK’s development.

## “SCIENTIFIC” APPROACH UNDER THE SECOND SEVEN YEAR PLAN

However, this period’s “scientific” approach to the development of all economic areas for the forestry and afforestation sector would mean, national targets for production-focused afforestation for the first time since the 1950s. These targets divided the forestry estate into productive categories, demanding that some 170,000 hectares of “fiber and pulp-wood forests” and 340,000 hectares of “oil-bearing forests” be created. The forestry industry would also be subject to goals surrounding the diversification of its productive output:

*[T]he output of chipboards and wood-fiber boards will be increased; and the wood chemical industry will be developed so that comprehensive and effective use is made of timber.*

The new planning document for the 2nd seven year plan was clear that none of this productive development should exist in isolation. Instead it called for the dissolution of differences between industrial and agricultural sectors, which would have had important implications for forestry policy. The Plan not only urged greater connection between forestry and other sectors of industrial production, but also that afforestation should become a goal shared by all members of the wider socio-economic community and the population at large:

*When planting trees, you should mobilize factory and office workers, pupils and students, housewives and all the other people living in the province.... The afforestation office and work-teams should be developed well so that they plant large numbers of trees in a mass movement.<sup>11</sup>*

However, in spite of the rigors of the planning process a paradigmatic shift occurred not long into this new planning period, and Kim Il-sung’s text “Let us Make Ryanggang Province a Beautiful Paradise” with its

assertion that “[F]orests are a priceless wealth of our nation and indispensable for economic construction and the life of the people...” would be among the last to focus on concrete capacity increases within the environmental sector.

## THE ECOLOGICAL MEANING OF THE SIXTH PARTY CONGRESS, 1980

This change of direction was first signalled at the Sixth Party Congress of the Korean Workers’ Party in October 1980, the last such meeting until the seventh Congress in September 2010. The Congress for its part heralded radical change in the governance and institutional structures of the DPRK. Kim Jong-il was appointed to the Politburo, the Korean Workers’ Party Secretariat and the Military Commission, and announced as heir to Kim Il-sung. The Congress also brought to an end the classical approach to centralised planning which had become economically highly disruptive. More specifically, it led to reduction in the perceived importance of the forestry sector as a component of the wider industrial agenda of the DPRK.

The document addressing the outcome of the Sixth Party Congress makes no mention of many of the previous planning periods’ priorities, including the “Five Great Nature Remaking Projects” which had set specific afforestation targets as one of its projects. Detailed targets for particular types of arboreal production and general afforestation are also absent from the Congress text. Whilst the economic importance of forestry was restated, the scale of future development was vague:

*[I]f we make good use of the mountains, we can solve numerous problems in socialist economic construction. We should strive to afforest the mountains with a view to the future and make comprehensive use of them... If we do this we shall be able to produce more timber and at the same time, obtain from the forests large quantities of raw materials for fibres, paper, oil, medicines, animal feed and so on.”<sup>12</sup>*



Thus a general statement about the overall scale of afforestation—“We should create two million hectares of new forests in the near future by launching a nationwide movement to plant trees”—replaced the previous specific targets for production. The targets and focus of the “Five Great Nature Remaking Projects” were superseded in the Sixth Party Congress document by the “Ten Long-Term Objectives of Socialist Economic Construction.” Although these ten objectives are referred to extensively within the Congress document, they were not crystallised into a short format for public or institutional dissemination until the following year in the text “Answers to Questions Raised by the Director of the Research and Planning Department of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda of the People’s Republic of Benin.” Within this text, Kim Il-sung is fairly succinct about the new policy direction:

*The ten long-term objectives of socialist economic construction which were put forward at the Sixth Congress of our Party are to produce annually 100,000 million kwh of electricity, 120 million tons of coal, 15 million tons of steel, 1.5 million tons of nonferrous metals, 20 million tons of cement, 7 million tons of chemical fertilizers, 1,500 million metres of fabric, 5 million tons of seafood, and 15 million tons of grain and to reclaim 300,000 hectares of tideland within the next ten years.”<sup>13</sup>*

#### TRACING THE DPRK’S DECLINE FROM AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Importantly for readers rooted in the era of Byungjin and the Sepho project, there is a lot in the approach of the contemporary DPRK that is recognizable from the period of the “Rural Theses.” If we are seeking to construct a framework through which to understand the development and importance of Sepho or other developmental projects at this time, it is critical to be cognizant of what predates the “Shock Brigades” currently “registering signal successes in the reclamation

of Sepho tableland day by day”, those from the Korean People’s Army who are making “new innovations there...” and have “... secured nearly 100 000 tons of soil ameliorators including scores of thousand tons of peat and compost and several thousand tons of slaked lime and carbide slag...”. Readers might also benefit from being aware of what came before the “Party Committees...who are consistently pushing forward this work...”, not to mention Kim Jong-un’s “...desire [to]... set forth the tasks of finding out all lands suitable to creating green fields in Sepho...to create man-made and natural pastures and build a large-scale stockbreeding base“.

#### TRACING THE DPRK’S DECLINE FROM AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Such a positivistic review and its connections however is only part of the story, as our examination of the period following the Sixth Party Congress. Perhaps beyond the positivity and optimism the current process of adaptation and abandonment bears more in common with the era of the early 1980s than of that era of crisis and disaster. What could be seen in 1980 and 1981 was a new developmental and production approach markedly different from previous approaches no longer focused on the long term, but on yearly production targets. Such an approach potentially avoids the disruptive impact of previous long-term planning approaches/strategies, but at the loss of certain level of utopian or revolutionary urgency. The fulfilment of such goals and strategy might bring about a utopia much less grand in nature, much more incremental in construction, but perhaps achievable. Might this be true in 2013, the abandonment or diminution of utopian and dramatic approaches to the forging of new revolutionary land from the sea in favour of more grounded attempts to rehabilitate underutilised or fallow land, allowing for actual achievement of measurable goals?

Sepho and the Byungjin Line are certainly closely connected in their defensiveness of posture. Byungjin’s commitment to nuclear deterrence is rooted in a narrative of struggle and overcoming, the Sepho Grassland Reclamation Project on the other hand is determined with great effort to rehabilitate under-utilised or abandoned

landscapes. These are not the goals of the optimistic or the expansionist, more the agenda of a nation and its institutions bent on localised or regional existence. Sepho serves as an exemplar of utopianism and developmental approaches on a domestic and domesticated scale, a transformational commitment to the achievable and an environmental conception in which landscape becomes the everyday... a landscape of the courtyard.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Kim Jong-un, "On Bringing About a Revolutionary Turn in Land Administration with the Requirements of the Building of a Thriving Socialist Country," April 27, 2012.
- 2 Kim Il-sung, "Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country," Works 18 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964).
- 3 Kim Il-sung, "On Some Measures to Develop the Building-Materials Industry," Works 18 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964).
- 4 Kim Il-sung, "On Enhancing the Party Spirit, Class Spirit and Popular Spirit of the Leading Functionaries and Improving the Management of the National Economy," Works 18 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964).
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- 9 Kim Il-sung, "The Land Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", Works 32 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House. 1977).
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- 11 Kim Il-sung, "Let Us Make Ryanggang Province a Beautiful Paradise," Works 34 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977).
- 12 Kim Il-sung, "Speech at The Sixth Party Congress," Works 35 (Pyongyang, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1979).
- 13 Kim Il-sung, "Answers to Questions Raised by the Director of the Research and Planning Department of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda of the People's Republic of Benin," Works 36 (Pyongyang Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1981).



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