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Re-examining the Cult of Personality: A Comparative Cross-national Case Study of Kim Il Sung,
Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh

by

Thach Hong Pham

Under the Direction of Larry Berman, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

The thesis re-examines the utility of the charismatic leader's cult of personality as a strategic power-enhancing tool by performing a cross-national comparative case study of three Asian personality cults – Kim Il Sung, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh. To what extent did these cult leaders possess the godlike powers that the cult of personality literature implies? The thesis finds support for the conclusion that increasing deification of a leader is not always positively correlated with a leader's godlike powers, operationalized as a leader's unilateral decision-making powers over national policies. Kim Il Sung's cult was manipulated by family members for their benefit. Mao Zedong attempted to wield the power of the cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution but could not control the Red Guards. The Communist Party of Vietnam utilized the cult of Ho Chi Minh to maintain the image of national unity while ignoring his policy directives.

INDEX WORDS: Cult of personality, charisma, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Kim Il Sung, Asian history

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Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh

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August 2021

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Tho Thi Tran and Dung Van Vu, and my partner, Blake Alexander Dernus. Their love and support have and will continue to nourish my academic journey.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- CCP Chinese Community Party
- DPRK Democratic People's Republic of North Korea
- DRV Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng Hòa)
- ICP Indochinese Communist Party
- PLA People's Liberation Army
- PRC People's Republic of China
- RVN Republic of Vietnam (Việt Nam Cộng Hòa)
- SRV Socialist Republic of Vietnam
- USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
- VWP Vietnam Worker's Party (Đảng Lao động Việt Nam)
- WPK Worker's Party of Korea

1 INTRODUCTION

Britney Spear's court conservatorship has once again brought into public debate the autonomy of celebrities, often thought of in pop culture as larger than life figures adored by many. On the surface, Spears is a pop sensation with millions of fans worldwide. Behind the scenes, she struggled in court against her father for power over her estate and life decisions. Spear's wrestle for power against her father is not the first and only example of celebrities or pop icons who are exploited by those around them, profiting off the commercialization of the icon.

From the 20th - 21st century, technological advancements have provided an avenue for the elevation of politicians' status to those of celebrities. The rise of television engendered a focus in politics on personality rather than policies. Dwight Eisenhower's presidential campaign strategies sparked the rise of television advertisements and the incorporation of celebrities on the campaign trail. Eisenhower provided a model for subsequent presidents such as John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan on how to capitalize on a candidate's charismatic appeal. The advent of social media continues to blur the lines between politicians and celebrity icons. For example, "Uncle" Bernie with his viral mittens at the 2021 Presidential Inauguration is a beloved cultural icon to many young Progressives and Democrats. Former President Barack Obama's Twitter boasts 130.1 million followers, the most of any Twitter account and beating out sensational pop icons such as Rihanna, Taylor Swift, and Justin Bieber. Former President Donald Trump, a television star turned politician similar to former President Ronald Reagan and *The Terminator* star Arnold Schwarzenegger, also amassed a following of over 88 million on Twitter while developing a cult of personality around his "America First" rhetoric before he was permanently banned from the social media platform. In the past decade, the world has seen an increasing trend in populism and subsequently, the creation of modern personality cults around populist leaders

such as America's Donald Trump, Russia's Vladimir Putin, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, and Turkey's Recep Erdogan just to name a few. Researchers have also noted China's trend towards a more personalized political system with Xi Jinping as the leader of a personality cult carefully manufactured by the Chinese Communist Party.¹

As the line between celebrities and politicians blur and personality cults continue to manifest around populist leaders, it behooves the public to consider to what extent is the same power dynamics between celebrities and their controlling exploiters applicable to political figures, specifically those with large cult-like followings. The thesis examines the cases of three historic Asian leaders with prominent personality cults – Kim Il Sung, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh. To what extent did these cult leaders possess the godlike powers that the cult of personality literature implies? More specifically, did having a personality cult allow them to unilaterally dictate national policies? I hypothesize that as the personality cult leader's image becomes increasingly deified, the cult leader's godlike powers, operationalized as decision-making powers over national policies, will decrease after reaching a climax point.

1.1 Power, Charisma, and the Cult of Personality

To investigate the research question, it is imperative to operationalize three interrelated concepts – power, charisma, and cult of personality. In political scientist Robert Dahl's seminal work on the concept of power, he states that power can be understood as in relation to people.² *A* has power over *B* to the extent that *A* can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do.³ Dahl expands on his theory of power by stating that “the *base* of an actor's power consists of all the resources – opportunities, acts, objects, etc. – that he can exploit in order to effect (sic) the

¹ Luwei Luqiu, “The Reappearance of the Cult of Personality in China,” *East Asia* 33 (2016): 289-307.

² Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 202.

³ *Ibid.*, 202-203.

behavior of another.”⁴ The base is passive and must be exploited to alter the behavior of others. Therefore, one of the bases of a charismatic person’s power is that individual’s charisma, and the *exercising* of charm or charisma is a *means* of altering the behavior of others.⁵

In response to Dahl, sociologist Talcott Parsons argues that power is not a zero-sum game, and therefore, should not be thought of as merely securing compliance with a wish between two parties. He defines power, within the context of a political organization, as a “generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions.”⁶ In an organization, the effectiveness of the collective is dependent on the hierarchical ordering of the relative strategic importance of contributions. Therefore, conditions governing the imposition of contributions impact power comparability. Furthermore, for power to function, it must be legitimized. This leads Parsons to revise Dahl’s statement as “the power of *A* over *B* is, in its legitimized form, the ‘right’ of *A*, as a decision-making unit involved in collective process, to make decisions which take precedence over those of *B*, in the interest of the effectiveness of the collective operation as a whole.”⁷ According to Parsons, the *right* to use power to assert the priority of one’s decision over another’s is called authority, and dispositions to noncompliance of the higher authority figure is the result of the incomplete institutionalize of power of the higher authority holder.⁸

⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁵ Ibid., 203.

⁶ Talcott Parsons, “On the Concept of Political Power,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 3 (1963): 237.

⁷ Ibid., 243.

⁸ Ibid., 243.

In Max Weber's 1919 speech, he introduces the idea of charisma or the "personal gift of grace"⁹ as a form of legitimation of a leader's authority. He argues that the modern party elects the demagogic leader, expecting the leader's personality to increase votes and mandates, and thereby power and more opportunities for the party and its followers. Therefore, the party's power relies on the leader's personalistic appeal. The basis of the charismatic or personalistic leader's claim to legitimacy lies in the masses' recognition that it is the duty of the charismatic leader to recognize his special virtues and act properly. The masses' recognition may manifest itself as complete personal devotion that arises out of enthusiasm, despair, or hope.¹⁰ However, Weber notes that the party machine, or the whole apparatus of people behind a leader, could be dominated by party officials who play a more direct role in the day-to-day functions of business. Despite potential bureaucratic domination, Weber notes that party officials submit to a leader's personality if it has a strong demagogic appeal, or "the firm belief of the masses in the ethical substance of his policy, and, above all, their belief in the ethical character of his personality."¹¹ A demagogic leader can dominate the political organization as long as he maintains the masses' recognition of his charisma, or extraordinary qualities.

Weber's ideas on the pure type of charismatic leadership is further expanded in his book, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. "The term 'charisma' will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional

⁹ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," Originally a speech at Munich University 1918, from H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 79.

¹⁰ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 359.

¹¹ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," Originally a speech at Munich University 1918, from H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 106.

powers or qualities. These are such as not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.”¹² The reference to “supernatural,” “superhuman,” and “divine origin” implies religious associations with charisma as the basis for godlike or divine powers. However, the Weberian charismatic leader does not have to be a *good* leader, in the moral sense, as Weber claims that, “Charismatic leadership has emerged in all places and in all historical epochs...the magician and the prophet on the one hand, and in the elected war lord, the gang leader and *condotierre* on the other hand.”¹³

To Weber, charisma is a revolutionary force that is born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm. Charismatic leadership does not exist in a system of formal rules or legal principles. In the pure type of charismatic leadership, the leader is depicted as having godlike powers. He is unbound by neither judicial precedent nor administrative organs and dictates divine judgements and revelations.¹⁴ However, charismatic authority is unstable since the charismatic leader must continue to reinforce the masses’ recognition of his charisma through demonstrations of his charismatic powers. Therefore, charismatic authority must be either traditionalized, rationalized, or a combination of both. Weber points to two underlying motives for this routinization of charisma: (1) for the interests of followers by continuously reactivating the community (2) for the interests of the administrative staff to stabilize and consolidate their authority, social prestige, economic advantages, and the continuation of the administration.¹⁵

¹² Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 358-359.

¹³ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” Originally a speech at Munich University 1918, from H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 80.

¹⁴ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 361.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 364.

American political scientist Robert Tucker expands on Weber's theory of charismatic leadership in his analysis of Vladimir Lenin's personal authority over the Bolshevik revolutionary movement. Tucker criticizes Weber's theory as incomplete, noting that it does not clearly clarify which leaders are charismatic and what makes them charismatic.¹⁶ According to Tucker, the extraordinary qualities through which a leader may acquire perceived charisma, or recognition, from followers is possessing the extraordinary powers of vision and persuasion in political discourse, having a sense of mission or believing in themselves that they were the leader chosen to head the movement, maintaining the public image of self-confidence and faith in the movement despite failures, and using rhetoric that taps into followers' distress while framing the leader or movement as the solution.¹⁷ Weber's characterization of charisma as a revolutionary force leads Tucker to specify that the charismatic leader is one who can summon people to join a charismatic movement for change and lead such a movement.¹⁸ The charismatic movement starts with a group of people who surrounds the charismatic leader and accepts his authority. The ring of followers surrounding the charismatic leader declines and grows until it reaches the status of a movement, organizes, and attains political power.

Why is it that charismatic leadership typically emerges in the context of movements for change, and why do followers accept the charismatic leader's authority? Tucker reasons that followers are distressed, and the charismatic leader is "one in whom, by virtue of unusual personal qualities, the promise or hope of salvation – deliverance from distress – appears to be embodied. He is in essence a savior, or one who is so perceived by his followers."¹⁹ The source of distress varies from physical to emotional such as persecution, natural catastrophes, extreme

¹⁶ Robert Tucker, "The Theory of Charismatic Leadership," *Daedalus* 97, no. 3 (1968): 732.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 736.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 737.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 742-743.

economic hardship, or feelings of oppression in colonized peoples.²⁰ Erik Erikson identifies three forms of distress that make people “charisma-hungry” – fear, anxiety, and existential dread.²¹ For example, a small-scale but vigorous charismatic movement may come from an oppressed racial or ethnic minority in a society with relatively low general levels of distress or if there is mass distress, a larger charismatic movement may evolve such as in the context of war. The unique personal authority of the charismatic leader and the people’s recognition of the leader’s movement as embodying salvation leads to the development of a spontaneous cult of personality, or what Tucker describes as a symptom of the charismatic leader-follower relationship.²²

The term ‘cult of personality,’ or ‘cult of individuality,’ is frequently attributed to Nikita Khrushchev in his 1956 speech denouncing the cult of the individual and Stalinism as in tension with Marxist ideology.²³ However, the Russian terminology for cult of individuality, ‘Kul’t lichnosti,’ had already appeared earlier in 1953 when it was utilized by Stalin’s successor, Georgi Malenkov, in his reference to Stalin.²⁴ The exact definition of a cult of personality varies according to historical eras and academic discipline. Though the origin of the concept is subject to historical debates, philosophers and academics have laid the theoretical foundations for identifying key characteristics of a personality cult. To operationalize the concept of the cult of personality, the scope of this thesis focuses on the modern cult of personality during the twentieth century.

²⁰ Ibid., 744.

²¹ Ibid., 745.

²² Ibid., 747.

²³ "Khrushchev's Secret Speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences,' Delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," February 25, 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, From the Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 84th Congress, 2nd Session (May 22, 1956-June 11, 1956), C11, Part 7 (June 4, 1956), pp. 9389-9403, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115995>.

²⁴ Anita Pisch, “The Phenomenon of the Personality Cult – A Historical Perspective,” in *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters: Archetypes, Inventions, and Fabrications* (Australia: ANU Press, 2016): 52.

The cult of personality is not a monolithic concept consisting of an authoritative leader and devoted followers. It is a phenomenon characterized by the existence of multiple traits. Political scientist Jeremy Paltiel's comparative research of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under Joseph Stalin and the People's Republic of China (PRC) under Mao Zedong defines the cult of personality as the result of a personalistic leader who mobilizes political combat to establish authority against the party's institutionalized authority and eventually becomes "the fountainhead of authority for an entire political system."²⁵ Political scientist Pao Min Chang defines the cult of personality as "the artificial elevation of the status and authority of one man...through the deliberate creation, projection and propagation of a godlike image."²⁶ Anita Pisch describes key features of a cult of personality to include elevation and glorification of an individual, a manufactured image of the cult's object, the use of mass media, and parallels to religion.²⁷ However, all the aforementioned top-down definitions tend to ignore the agency of the cult followers in the creation of the cult.

Xin Lu and Elena Soboleva's comparative study of contemporary cults of personality in Russia and China provides a more systematic definition of the personality cult. According to Lu and Soboleva, there are four aspects of a cult of personality: (1) existence of cult followers, (2) a leader that represents a certain ideology or mission whose followers must believe is the solution to their difficulties, (3) institutionalization to sustain itself, and (4) existence within a patrimonialism form of governance.²⁸ Lu and Soboleva, citing Michel Foucault's metaphor of power relations, argued that the cult of personality is not something one individual can 'possess'

²⁵ Jeremy Paltiel, "The Cult of Personality: Some Comparative Reflections on Political Culture in Leninist Regimes," *Studied in Comparative Communism* 16, no. 1 (1983): 50.

²⁶ Pao-min Chang, translated and quoted by Jeremy Taylor from Pao-min Chang, "The Phenomenon of Power: Some Random Thoughts," *Zhongshan Xueshu Luncong (Chungshan Academic Writings)*, no. 18 (2000): 141.

²⁷ Pisch, 54.

²⁸ Xin Lu and Elena Soboleva, "Personality Cults in Modern Politics: Cases from Russia and China," *CGP Working Paper Series* (2014): 4-8.

or ‘utilize’ since the personality cult’s power flows bilaterally from a leader-to-follower and follower-to-leader relationship. In other words, a leader who displays charisma may form a following, and the follower’s perceptions of the leader’s charisma, or what Weber calls as recognition, creates devotion.

A personality cult is established through multiple means. According to historian Frank Dikötter, “There were hagiographers, photographers, playwrights, composers, poets, editors, and choreographers. There were powerful ministers of propaganda, and sometimes entire branches of industry. But the ultimate responsibility lay with the dictators themselves.”²⁹ Dictators reveal what they want followers to know, by carefully crafting and cultivating an image worthy of reverence and idolization. According to Lu and Soboleva, after a cult has been formed, it must be institutionalized to ensure the object of the cult’s survival. Their idea reflects Weber’s theory of routinization of charisma.³⁰ Per Lu and Soboleva, to institutionalize the cult is to inject it into every aspect of the state from economics to civil society to politics so that the cult is repeatedly affirmed and psychologically persistent in the followers’ minds. Examples of institutionalization include implementing a system of succession after the passing of the cult’s object, dispersing the mythical aspects of the cult’s object, and establishing a structured routinized reiteration of devotion to the cult’s object and his mission.³¹ Historically, the establishment of a cult of personality heavily involved institutions involved in communications such as the media and/or the state propaganda apparatus.

²⁹ Frank Dikötter, *How to be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century* (London, UK, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019): xii.

³⁰ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 363-373.

³¹ Xin Lu and Elena Soboleva, 6; Arif Dirlik, “Mao Zedong: Charismatic Leadership and the Contradictions of Socialist Revolution,” in *Charismatic Leadership and Social Movements: The Revolutionary Power of Ordinary Men and Women*, ed. Jan Willem Stutje (New York: Berghahn Books, Inc., 2012), 119.

The academic literature on the personality cult focuses largely on personality cults of nondemocratic leaders and portrays the purpose of the personality cult as a power enhancing tool for the leader and his movement. The personality cult helps to consolidate power and/or to enhance the image of legitimate authority; thereby, ensuring the endurance of the object of the cult and the regime's survival.³² Dikötter argues that the purpose of the cult is to sow confusion, isolate individuals, and enforce obedience through self-censorship.³³ Paltiel argues that the cult of personality is brought about by a leader seeking to consolidate power in a fracturing political party.³⁴ Hannah Arendt theorizes that the leader of a totalitarian regime is all-powerful figure whose role is to unite the totalitarian system and assume blanket responsibility for actions performed by underlings on behalf of the regime. The leader is irreplaceable by the movement or party, but "he is needed, not as a person but as a function, and such he is indispensable to the movement."³⁵

Arendt's depiction of the all-powerful totalitarian leader as a function rather than a person seemingly strips away the leader's agency and begs the main research question of this thesis. To what extent do leaders with personality cults possess the godlike powers that the cult of personality literature implies? Kim Il Sung, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh came to power during revolutionary periods of their respective nations and during the context of war, a great societal distress. According to the cult of personality literature, large-scale war that creates general distress in society coupled with revolutionary fervor produces a ripe environment for

³² Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," (speech, Munich University, 1918); Jeremy Paltiel, "The Cult of Personality: Some Comparative Reflections on Political Culture in Leninist Regimes," *Studied in Comparative Communism* 16, no. 1 (1983): 49-64; Luwei Luqiu, "The Reappearance of the Cult of Personality in China," *East Asia* 33 (2016): 291; Dikötter, Frank. *Dictators: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020.

³³ Dikötter, xiii.

³⁴ Paltiel, 50.

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1968), 374.

charismatic leaders to form a large movement for change with “charisma-hungry” followers devoted to the leader’s mission; thereby, granting the charismatic leader godlike powers over the party movement. If the cult leader possesses the godlike powers stemming from followers’ reverence as depicted by the extant literature, then one can assume that he has unilateral power of over the party and national policy decisions. However, a cursory review of the long periods of rule under of Kim, Mao, and Ho revealed inklings of internal struggles by these supposedly all-powerful leaders against fellow party rivals over the direction of national policies. Given this possible power struggle, to what extent does the personality cult in fact provide charismatic leaders with godlike powers? More specifically, to what extent does the personality cult allow its object to express these godlike powers in the form of unilaterally dictating national policies?

I hypothesize that as the personality cult leader’s public image becomes increasingly deified, the cult leader’s godlike powers, operationalized as decision-making powers over national policies, will decrease after reaching a climax point. In examining Kim, Mao, and Ho’s personality cults, I explore the interrelated factors of war, foreign actors, political ideology, and agency.

2 METHODOLOGY

The thesis utilizes Parson's definition of power and the Lu and Soboleva definition of cult of personality as previously defined.³⁶ Additionally, the elevation and glorification of the leader in a quasi-religious manner is added as a characteristic of the cult of personality given its prominent appearance in the modern personality cults. The research design is focused on theory testing by performing a comparative cross-national multi-case study of the personality cults of Kim Il Sung, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh during the 20th century. The thesis aims to re-examine the theoretical utility of the cult of personality as a strategic power enhancing tool.

The thesis attempts to broaden the field of political science's understanding of how personality cults operate in the context of Asian revolutionary regimes. The cases of Kim, Mao, and Ho were chosen because of their similarities. These leaders came to power in the 20th century when their nations were experiencing revolutionary fervor. The three men were able to amass a devoted following and have been the object of a personality cult even into the 21st century. Though the thesis examines the cases of Kim and Mao, it mainly focuses on the evolution of Ho's cult of personality because there has been relatively less contribution in the cult of personality literature on Ho in comparison to Kim and Mao.

The methodology makes use of some primary sources but is primarily reliant on literature review considering the inaccessibility of archives during the COVID-19 pandemic. I utilize translated writings from the Wilson Center Digital Archive and Marxists Internet Archive. I draw from a diverse array of sources including extant academic literature, meeting memos, and biographies to describe the extent in which the cult of personality influenced each men's power

³⁶ (1) existence of cult followers, (2) a leader that represents a certain ideology or mission whose followers must believe is the solution to their difficulties, (3) institutionalization to sustain itself, and (4) existence within a patrimonialism form of governance.

to dictate national policies. I rely heavily on Dikötter's book as a starting point for exploring the formation of each men's cult of personality. For the case of Kim Il Sung, I rely on John Cha and K.J. Sohn's book *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-Il* which includes testimonies from North Korean defector Hwang Jang Yop who was the general secretariat of the Worker's Party of North Korea until his defection to South Korea in 1997. I also consult Dae-Sook Suh's *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*, Andrei Lankov's *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945 – 1960*, Bradley Martin's *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, and relevant academic journals.

For the case of Mao Zedong, I rely heavily on the Wilson Center Digital Archive and the Marxists Internet Archive for translated conversations and speeches of Mao and other first-generation revolutionaries of the Chinese Communist Party. I also rely on translated books such as *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by Mao's personal physician Dr. Li Zhisui, Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao's *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, and Geremie Barme's *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*.

For the case of Ho, I rely on Olga Dror's article, "Establishing Ho Chi Minh Cult: Vietnamese Traditions and Their Transformations," as well as a number of books including William Duiker's *Ho Chi Minh*, David Halberstam's *Ho*, Pierre Brocheaux's *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, William Warbey's *Ho Chi Minh and the Struggle for an Independent Vietnam*, and Lien-Hang Nguyen's *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. It has been rumored by experts on Vietnamese history that Ho Chi Minh published two autobiographies, *Vừa đi đường vừa kể chuyện* (*Walking and Talking*) and *Những mẩu chuyện về đời hoạt động của Hồ Chủ Tịch* (*Vignettes/Glimpses of President Ho's Life and Activities*) under the pseudonyms T. Lan and Tran Dan Tien, respectively. I was not able to access *Vignettes* nor

find a translated version of *Walking and Talking*. My biggest regret is not having the language skills to access the broad untranslated books, articles, and other various works written by and/or on these men.

3 KIM IL SUNG

The case of Kim Il Sung contributes a critical insight into the cult of personality. The personality cult can be created and manipulated by others close to the cult's object for their personal benefits. This portion of the thesis examines the creation of Kim Il Sung's cult of personality and focuses not only on the role of Kim Il Sung in building his cult but also the roles of foreign actors and the consequences of a succession rivalry between his family members, namely his son Kim Jong Il and his younger brother Kim Yong Ju. In the context of a distressing civil war and with the political backing of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Kim Il Sung was able to seize political power. He became a ruthless dictator, consolidating political power through constant purges and set the stage for the subsequent development of his cult of personality. As the elder Kim grew older, the issue of succession arose. The two younger Kims had the same goal of succeeding the elder Kim, and therefore, attempted to outcompete each other in flattering Kim Il Sung through excessive idolization and elevation of the status of the Kim Il Sung from a man to a god.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, has lived under the dynastic rule of the Kim family ever since Kim Il Sung was imposed on the people by the Soviet Union in 1945.³⁷ Kim sought to penetrate every aspect of society. According to Dikötter,

“Kim was ubiquitous. He was a restless, energetic leader, who concerned himself with every detail. There were inspections of schools, tours of cooperatives, visits to factories, even impromptu appearances at local meetings that he would chair, all of them reported in minute detail with numerous photographs in the newspapers.”³⁸

Even before Kim became the ‘Suryong,’ or Great Leader, numerous writers contributed to engineering his heroic image. They extolled his great leadership and his mythical

³⁷ Dikötter, 123.

³⁸ Ibid., 131.

revolutionary past against the Japanese invaders.³⁹ Through the media and with the power bestowed upon him by Stalin, Kim began to cultivate his image as a brave and modest leader whom the people could rally behind.

During his reign over the DPRK, Kim implemented patrimonialism as the form of governance through constantly purging military and political institutions and replacing experienced officials with loyal supporters and his family members.⁴⁰ The context of the chaotic and tumultuous Korean War allowed Kim to carry out constant purges of rival party factions by accusing them of being disloyal to the party or responsible for the disastrous impacts of the war. Kim's constant purges of the party reflects Paltiel's theory of a cult of personality that is formed as result of political combat wielded against party rivals to consolidate power. As the Korean War (1950 – 1953) ravaged the country, Kim moved to establish his authority within the factious Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) which was made up of four factions: the Domestic, the Yanan, the Guerrilla (which includes the Kapsan faction), and the Soviet. In 1950, Kim purged Mu Chong, the Yanan's top military general, by accusing him of military insubordination and being responsible for the loss of Pyongyang during the Korean War. It is also speculated that Kim purged Mu Chong for fear that Mu's Chinese connections could have strengthened his place in the party after the intervention of the Chinese military in the Korean War.⁴¹

In 1951, Kim and Ho Kai, Number Two within the party and leader of the Soviet Koreans, were in tension on how to deal with possible members who were not loyal to the party.⁴² Kim ultimately accused Ho Kai of excessive party purges and expelled him from the

³⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁴¹ Hakjoon Kim, "Mu Chong," in *The Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, eds. Spencer Tucker and James Matray (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 599.

⁴² Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 123.

party and re-instated those who were purged by Ho-Kai. According to Dikötter, those re-instated embraced Kim as their savior.⁴³ Meanwhile, the Soviet Koreans' leadership suffered a devastating blow with the expulsion of Ho-Kai and Kim was one step closer to consolidating power. By the 1950s, Kim had created a base of loyal followers within the party.

After Khrushchev launched his de-Stalinization campaign, Kim distanced himself from the Soviet Union. He implemented Hwang Jang Yop's idea of 'juche,' or self-reliance ideology despite still taking foreign assistance from the USSR and PRC. Juche ideology, still espoused in modern-day North Korea under Kim Jong Un, represents the solution to the economic difficulties of Kim Il Sung followers'.⁴⁴ Kim positioned himself as the leader whose mission was to alleviate his followers' distress. In 1956, Ri Sang-Jo, DPRK Ambassador to the Soviet Union, wrote to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee and the Central Committee of the Korean Worker's Party in rebuke of Kim's purges and decisions made at the Korean Worker's Party 3rd Congress. Ri's letter provides evidence for that claim that by the 1950s, Kim was engendering a cult of personality through political combat. Ri wrote,

“All those comrades who, guided by Leninist organizational principles, expressed principled criticism of the cult of personality of Kim Il Sung, who harmed our party, were classed as ‘anti-party factionalists’ trying to overthrow the government and the leadership of the party...The ‘leading’ comrades managed to expel from the ranks of the party honest Communists who had courageously and openly spoken against the cult of personality of Kim Il Sung, through deception and threats against Central Committee members.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁵ "Letter from Ri Sang-jo to the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party," October 05, 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 233-295. Obtained by Nobuo Shimotomai and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114152>.

Moreover, Kim's cult of personality became increasingly institutionalized through routinized reiteration of devotion to his cult. For example, the Sinuiju Pulp Factory held daily meetings on Kim's teachings.⁴⁶ According to Ri,

“If one analyzes newspaper and magazine materials, school textbooks, fictional literature, and works of art, then we easily see the cult of personality here, there, and everywhere, that is, the name of Kim Il Sung is raised higher than the names of kings in bourgeois countries. The name of Kim Il Sung is celebrated in many songs...And as if this weren't enough, the young Kim Il Sung is called the father of Korean youth.”⁴⁷

According to historian and expert on North Korea, Andrei Lankov, “By the early 1960s Kim Il Sung had become not only supreme, but also the omnipotent ruler of North Korea – no longer merely ‘first among equals,’ as had been the case in the late 1940s.”⁴⁸

However, by the mid-1960s, Kim had not yet possessed godlike powers. The Kapsan faction sought to challenge Kim's increasing authority. The struggle between the Kapsan faction and Kim focused on ideological challenges about how to handle the country's economy and who should succeed the elder Kim. Kim Il Sung positioned his brother Kim Yong Ju as his successor; however, the Kapsan faction which had the support of filmmakers favored Pak Kum Chol who desired a more liberal approach to the economy. Kim purged the Kapsan faction in 1967 after acquiring enough support from fellow party members.⁴⁹ Following the Kapsan faction incident, Kim Yong Ju wrote the Ten Principles for the Monolithic Ideological System, regulations over the everyday lives of North Koreans that dictated a leader-worshiper relationship, to reinforce the monolithic system as a means of flattering his older brother and ensuring his position as

⁴⁶ Dikötter, 131.

⁴⁷ "Letter from Ri Sang-jo to the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party," October 05, 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 233-295. Obtained by Nobuo Shimotomai and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114152>.

⁴⁸ Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945 – 1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 63.

⁴⁹ John Cha and K. J. Sohn, *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-il: Notes from His Former Mentor* (United States of America: Abbott Press, 2021), 34.

successor. Ten Principles marked the beginning of Kim's one-man rule.⁵⁰ Kim Jong Il, who had a known love for movies, was promoted to cultural arts director of the Information Department and oversaw the publishing department to clean up what Kim Il Sung saw as anti-party elements in film arts.⁵¹ This was Kim Jong Il's way into the party mechanisms in order to compete against his uncle for succession. According to Bradley Martin,

“As enforcer of what the regime called its ‘monolithic’ or ‘unitary’ system, Kim Jong Il during the ‘60s and ‘70s presided over the shift to describing the state dogma as ‘Kimilsungism.’ The term, with its specific connotation of one-man rule, was credited to the junior Kim himself. While the elder Kim...increased tensions with the United States, his son set out to intensify the personality cult. Kim Jong Il...was convinced of the need to defend Kim Il Sung’s absolute authority and his revolutionary ideas ‘in order to tide over this difficult situation.’ It was during that period that the senior Kim made the transition from mere dictator to official deity.”⁵²

The competition between Kim Jong Il and his uncle, Kim Yong Ju, to succeed Kim Il Sung warped Kim Il Sung's image from a “partisan freedom fighter against the Japanese imperialism” to “a conquering hero, as if he and his shabby, hungry band of commandos had demolished the mighty Japanese military machine all by themselves. He [Kim Il Sung] emerged bigger than life, made possible by Kim Jong Il and his blind ambition to succeed power.”⁵³ Kim Jong Il became chief of the Information Department within two years. He founded a cinematic writers' group which would go on to produce revolutionary movies such as *Pibada* and *Flower Salesgirl* which contributed to the idolization of Kim Il Sung.⁵⁴ As the state implemented and reinforced the monolithic system, books on other ideologies were burned and replaced with ones that espoused praise upon the elder Kim. During the time in which Kim Jong Il was embedded in

⁵⁰ Jae-Cheon Lim, *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea: The Leader State* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 48.

⁵¹ Cha and Sohn, 36.

⁵² Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (United States: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 237.

⁵³ Cha and Sohn, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

the Information Department and publishing department, books with phrases like “Kim Il Sung the Illuminator”, “the Sun,” “the Oracle,” “the Omniscient,” “the Divine,” “Deity,” and “The King of Light” appeared.⁵⁵ “Kim Jong Il’s strategy for building his father’s personality cult was simple: keep the people in the dark and feed them your brand of goods. He isolated all communication channels and kept feeding them heroic deeds that Kim Il Sung supposedly accomplished.”⁵⁶ In 1969, he was appointed deputy chief of Party Organizational Department, directly under his uncle. The young Kim capitalized on his uncle’s declining health to staff both the Information Department and the Party Organizational Department with loyal friends and family members. Kim Jong Il built research institutes for his mother, father, and himself in his mission to institutionalize the family cult.⁵⁷ In 1973, Kim Jong Il renamed the Research Center for Korean Worker’s Party History to the Research Center for Comrade Kim Il Sung’s Revolutionary History.⁵⁸

Kim Jong Il manipulated the cult of Kim Il Sung, elevating it to that of an all-powerful omniscient god for his personal gains. He needed to outdo his uncle in pleasing his father while simultaneously setting the stage for his reign as the next charismatic leader. Despite possessing the personality cult of a god, Kim Il Sung still did not have godlike powers over national policies. Kim Il Sung, the man, became Kim Il Sung, the god, but without godlike powers. Kim Il Sung’s political powers over the management of the nation slowly faded during the 1960s until his death in 1994 as his younger son became increasingly embedded in the innerworkings and decision-making of the party. In February 1974, Kim Jong Il’s machinations to succeed his father proved fruitful. Kim Il Sung tapped his son, Kim Jong Il as his successor and officially

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47-48.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁷ Cha and Sohn, 49.

⁵⁸ Lim, 34.

eliminated the greatest threat to his now omniscient personality cult and regime's survival – succession – by institutionalizing a dynastic form of succession.⁵⁹ Kim Jong Il reworked his uncle's Ten Principles, distributed it across the country, and instructed people to memorize the new doctrine of Kim Il Sung which included statements such as “For our Great Leader Kim Il-sung, we must bestow upon him absolute authority. It is prerequisite for our revolution and the revolutionary will of our Party and the people” and “We must firmly establish order for the Party, State, and Military so that they can consistently function as a single unit under the leadership of our Great Leader Kim Il-sung. Establishing the sole, unique leadership structure of our Great Leader Kim Il-sung is a basic requirement in strengthening the Party structure ideologically and for enhancing the Party's capability in its leadership role, as well as a guarantee for the victory in our revolution and construction of the State.”⁶⁰

By 1980, it was clear that Kim Jong Il was in control of the state with his father becoming a figurehead. Government reporting structures changed as underlings reported matters of foreign affairs or the national economy to Kim Jong Il who would even send false reports to his father. Hwang Jang Yop wrote:

“Kim Jong-il ignored financial concerns as he drove hard for the completion of his projects, wasting tremendous financial resources and manpower. He ignored fundamental economic principles and invited national economic disaster...As a result, the coal-mining industry came dangerously close to shutting down. Nonetheless, Kim Jong-il gave Kim Il-sung glowing reports.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 44-74; Jae-Cheon Lim and Ho-Yeol Yoo, “Institutionalization of the Cult of the Kims: Its Implications for North Korean Political Succession,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22, no. 3 (2010): 341-354.

⁶⁰ Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One Ideology System, 1974, trans. Cha and Sohn in *Exit Emperor*, 52-53.

⁶¹ Hwang Jang Yop, quoted in Cha and Sohn, *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-il: Notes from His Former Mentor* (United States of America: Abbott Press, 2021), 59.

On the role of agency, as the elder Kim's health declined, he performed less on-site visits across the country, leaving him with less control over national policies. For example, Kim Il Sung rejected a co-educational system, believing boys and girls should be separated. A decade later, Kim Jong Il ordered the education committee to implement a co-educational system which left committee members fearful about Kim Il Sung's reactions. These committee members decided not to mention the change in policies to the elder Kim who never found out about North Korea's new co-educational system.⁶² The elder Kim also he received fewer reports from his son who expressed concerns about his failing eyes.

Kim Il Sung's political maneuvers to consolidate power within the Worker's Party of Korea set the stage for his son, Kim Jong Il, to institutionalize of the elder Kim's cult of personality through the manipulation of the media and arts. Party conflicts due to conflicting political ideologies resulted in constant purges that consolidated Kim Il Sung's dictatorship. The context of war and revolution allowed for Kim Jong Il to turn the cult of Kim Il Sung the man to Kim Il Sung the god while also manufacturing the cult of the Kim dynasty to legitimize his succession and authority. The young Kim gradually took over national decision-making powers from his aging father as the cult of the Kim dynasty penetrated every aspect of the state and society. Why was Kim Jong Il able to manipulate his father's cult of personality for his personal benefits? Perhaps it was because the elder Kim increasingly trusted his son – the one who had raised statues of him and produced films and books proclaiming his greatness. Perhaps his old age finally slowed the dictator and forced him to take a step back in decision-making. Perhaps his declining influence was the result of the party structure which placed Kim Jong Il in between his father and the party on the chain of command. The rise of Kim Jong Il was likely a result of

⁶² Cha and Sohn, 62.

an interplay between all three factors. The case of Kim Il Sung reveals that despite having a personality cult of a god, the charismatic leader does not necessarily have godlike powers. The cult of personality may be manipulated by associates close to the cult leader for their personal gains, similar to the relationship dynamic between celebrities and their controlling managers who profit from the characterization of the celebrity. Towards the end of his life, Kim Il Sung reigned, but he did not rule.

4 MAO ZEDONG

This section of the thesis explains the establishment of the cult of Mao and reveals that Mao's cult of personality did not grant him godlike powers in the form of unilateral decision-making powers over national policies. Though Mao was the center of a cult of personality in China, he was forced to share its power with first-generation revolutionaries such as Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Peng Dehuai, and other members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁶³ Mao constantly wrestled against other first-generation revolutionaries to dictate the country's direction. Even as Mao tried to harness the political power stemming from his charismatic movement by calling on the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, Mao would resign to the reality that he also did not have the power to fully control his charismatic movement.

Mao became involved in the CCP as a peasant guerilla fighter. Through unorthodox guerilla tactics, Mao was able to claim a region of land in the Jiangxi Province and declared it a Soviet Republic, financially backed by Moscow, in 1931.⁶⁴ However, Chinese Central Committee, being critical of Mao's guerrilla tactics, displaced Mao as head of the region and installed Zhou Enlai, an educated man, who previously described Mao's troops as "just bandits who roam here and there."⁶⁵ These so-called 'bandits' were Mao's followers and would contribute to the subsequent development of Mao's cult of personality.

Foreign actors played a major role in engendering the cult of Mao. Mao's military success after the Long March and Stalin's geopolitical strategies during the Cold War elevated

⁶³ Chongji Jin, "Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai at the Dawn of the People's Republic," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 1, no. 1 (2007): 8.

⁶⁴ Dikötter, 95.

⁶⁵ Zhou Enlai, quoted in Dikötter, *How to be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century* (London, UK, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 95.

Mao's authority within the ranks of the CCP. The Communist International (Comintern), an international association of national communist parties that was controlled by the USSR, began praising Mao as China's great leader. Mao commissioned a young American reporter to document his military successes in what would become a sensational book of international proportions. *Red Star over China*, the product of Mao's careful cultivation of his image, was filled with Mao's mythical past to further elevate his status and turn him into the symbolic leader of the CCP to the outside world.⁶⁶

From the late 1930s to mid-1940s, Mao established himself as a wise military leader and theoretician with the help of others. His personal physician noted that Mao had "an almost mystical faith in the role of the leader. He never doubted that his leadership, and only his leadership, would save and transform China. He was China's Stalin."⁶⁷ In 1943, Mao Zedong Thought, a term coined by Wang Jiaxiang, became compulsory and Mao began to rewrite Chinese history, evident through his report on the history of the party which placed Mao's Long March at the center.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the CCP reorganized Chinese society, classifying its population into groups based on their loyalties to the revolution. A patrimonialism form of government was established as one's access to food, education, marriage, and healthcare depended on one's class label, or 'chengfen.'⁶⁹ The party penetrated civil society and eliminated organizations outside the scope of the party.

However, the development of Mao's cult of personality faced a monumental challenge after Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech denounced the cult of personality and called for de-Stalinization. Mao rightly saw Khrushchev's speech as a threat to his authority as China's

⁶⁶ Dikötter, 97.

⁶⁷ Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1994), 115.

⁶⁸ Dikötter, 99.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

supreme leader. At the Eight Party Congress in 1956, Liu Shaoqi cited the Soviet Union's denouncement of the cult of the individual.

“The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, held last February, was an important political event of world significance. It not only drew up the Sixth Five-Year Plan of gigantic proportions, decided on many important policies and principles for further development of the cause of socialism and repudiated the cult of the individual which had had grave consequences inside the Party.”⁷⁰

According to Dikötter, Mao seethed at Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping for “taking control of the agenda and relegating him to the background.”⁷¹ The reports delivered at the Eight Party Congress lauded collectivized leadership and decried the cult of personality. Mao complained to his doctor. “I am going to resign the chairmanship of the republic...but I am still the chairman of the party. Why didn't they consult me about the party congress? They did not give me a chance to participate in drafting the political report. They did not let me see the text in advance.”⁷² By the mid 1950s, Liu and Mao's ideological differences were becoming clearer. Liu believed that China would undergo a certain degree of capitalism growth whereas Mao called Liu “a capitalist-roader who wielded power” and a “Khrushchev type who is sleeping next to us.”⁷³ Mao's personal physician observed that Liu and Deng's views of the party differed fundamentally from Mao's. The two men viewed the party as a decision-making organ, making Mao and them first amongst equals. However, Mao viewed himself as China's supreme leader.

After Khrushchev announced the Soviet Union's plan to catch up economically to the United States, Mao devised the Great Leap Forward (1958 – 1961) in an attempt to outstrip

⁷⁰ Liu Shaoqi, “The Political Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to the Eight National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” (speech, Eight National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Sept. 15, 1956), https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/8th_congress.htm.

⁷¹ Dikötter, 107.

⁷² Zhisui, 183.

⁷³ Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, trans. D. W. Y. Kwok (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996): 3.

British steel production and upstage Khrushchev. The Great Leap Forward was a disaster to China's economy and brought about widespread national famine. In 1959 at the Lushan Conference, Peng Dehua tried to warn Mao of the corruption and economic fallout that could ensue from the Great Leap Forward, but was subsequently denounced as a party of a right-opportunist anti-party clique.⁷⁴ An estimated number of deaths related to the famine range from 23 to 55 million.⁷⁵ Mao was forced to the second-front of decision-making as other first-generation revolutionaries like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping tried to amend China's economy while still utilizing the cult of Mao as a symbol of national unity and state authority.

Evidence of Mao expressing a sense of powerlessness over national matters despite possessing a cult of personality is seen during a conversation between the Chairman and other members of the Chinese Community Party.

“Comrade T’ao Chu said: ‘Supreme power has slipped from your hands.’ The Chairman said: ‘This is because I deliberately relinquished it. Now, however, they have set up independent kingdoms; there are many things I have not been consulted about, such as the land problem, the Tientsin speeches, the cooperatives in Shansi...All these things should really have been discussed at the Centre before decisions were taken. Teng Hsiao-p’ing never came to consult me: from 1959 to the present he has never consulted me over anything at all...It’s not so bad that I am not allowed to complete my work, but I don’t like being treated as a dead ancestor.’”⁷⁶

Through his charisma, Mao was able to regain political power over the party leadership by mobilizing the Red Guards, a student-led social movement which united under Mao Zedong Thought. The Red Guards were formed in 1966 when middle-school students in support of Mao

⁷⁴ Michael Schoenhals, “Yang Xianzhen’s Critique of the Great Leap Forward,” *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 3 (1992): 592.

⁷⁵ Clayton Brown, “China’s Great Leap Forward,” *US, Asia, and the World: 1914 – 2012* 17, no. 3 (2012): 24.

⁷⁶ T’ao Chu and Mao Zedong, “Talk at the Report Meeting,” in *Long Live Mao Tse-tung Thought* (meeting transcript, Oct. 24, 1966), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_68.htm.

Zedong Thought gathered to criticize the play *Hai Rui Dismissed* and their school administrators.

The Red Guards' oath was:

“We are the guards of red power. Chairman Mao of the Party Central is our mountain of support. Liberation of all mankind is our righteous responsibility; Mao Zedong Thought is the highest guiding principle for all our actions. We swear to protect the Party Central and to protect our great leader Chairman Mao. We resolutely will shed our last drop of blood!”⁷⁷

Mao understood how to tap into the power of the masses in order to purge the party from without. He provided political legitimacy to the Red Guards in a letter that expressed his support.

“The two big-character posters which you wrote on 24 June and 4 July express your anger at, and denunciation of, all landlords, bourgeois, imperialists, revisionists, and their running dogs who exploit and oppress the workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals and revolutionary parties and groupings. You say it is right to rebel against reactionaries; I enthusiastically support you.”⁷⁸

With Mao's support, Red Guards movements popped up across the country. A Mass Meeting Celebrating the Cultural Revolution was scheduled for August 18, 1966. Close to a million representatives of the Red Guards movement gathered at Tiananmen Square to see Mao Zedong, shouting, “Long Live Chairman Mao!”⁷⁹ Mao sidelined Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, both of whom he accused as suppressing the student revolution.⁸⁰ Mao replaced Liu Shaoqi as second in command and promoted Lin Biao who had constantly professed praises of the great Chairman at party congresses. Little did Mao know, Lin was secretly critical of Mao, having once wrote that the Great Leap Forward was a disaster.⁸¹ Lin promoted Mao Zedong Thought within the armed forces while expanding his own power by promoting loyal followers to key positions. Lin was able to utilize the cult of Mao for his own gains, but eventually died in a

⁷⁷ Yan and Gao, 57.

⁷⁸ Mao Zedong, “A Letter to the Red Guards of Tsinghua University Middle School,” in *Long Live Mao Tse-tung Thought* (letter, Aug. 1, 1966), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_60.htm.

⁷⁹ Yan and Gao, 63.

⁸⁰ Dikötter, 114.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

mysterious plane crash in 1971.⁸² As for Liu, his rank within the CCP fell as the media continued to promote Mao Zedong Thought in the fervor of the Cultural Revolution.

Mao's mobilization of the Red Guards helped him to regain political power over the party. Mao had become the center of a personality cult that revered him as its great leader and elevated him to the status of a god. However, even as the leader of a large charismatic movement such as the Red Guard, Mao could not control the Red Guards. The Red Guards, motivated by Lin Biao, started a Destroy the Four Olds movement which spread across the nation. They destroyed historical and religious sites and artifacts, replaced Buddhist icons with pictures of Mao Zedong, renamed street signs and buildings, overthrew provincial party committees, and accosted artists and writers who were accused of being reactionary academic authorities. They instilled a Red Terror across the country through inhuman torture practices against those who opposed them.⁸³ The Red Guards waged violence against the old order, the CCP, and the military in their attempt to establish a new administration in the PRC. Eventually, the Red Guards spiral out of Mao's control. Factions appeared within the Red Guards as they fought over which group was truer to Mao Zedong Thought. Mao previously had a policy of non-intervention by the army but on January 21, he called in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to restore order and stability in provinces with radical groups of Red Guards. Mao wrote in his announcement to the army's General Political Department, "The army should extend help wherever they ask for help. The so-called non-interference is false interference. It has long ago become interference. In connection with this, I ask that a new order be issued and the former one be rescinded."⁸⁴ From the perspective of Parson's theory of political power, Mao lost control of the Red Guards movement

⁸² Ibid.,120.

⁸³ Yan and Gao, 82.

⁸⁴ Mao Zedong, quoted in Juliana Heaslet, "The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution," *Asian Survey* 12, no. 12 (1972): 1041.

because he did not establish clear guidelines and organizational control over movement; thereby, never fully institutionalizing his power as the higher authority.

After Mao Zedong died in 1976, the CCP reworked the reverence and idolization of Mao to fit the needs of the party. Mao was needed not as a person but as a function similar to Arendt's depiction of the totalitarian leader. In 1979, Marshal Ye Jianying, a top party official, declared, "What we call Mao Zedong Thought...is not the product of Mao Zedong's personal wisdom alone; it is the product of the wisdom of Mao and his comrades-in-arms...It is the crystallization of the collective wisdom of the Chinese Communist Party."⁸⁵ Even though Mao's cult of personality, built on terror and some genuine adoration, elevated him to symbolize Chinese national unity and leadership, it did not grant him ultimate unilateral decision-making powers. By the end of the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party came to embrace the cult of Mao, allowing him to proceed with the Great Leap Forward. When the economic plan proved disastrous for the Chinese economy and people, Mao was relegated to the side as other first-generation revolutionaries implemented economic reform policies to mend the economy. A powerless Mao utilized his personality cult to mobilize the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution to regain power and banish the old party leadership. However, Mao also lost control over the Red Guards as they destroyed cities and instilled an atmosphere of terror. The case of Mao reveals how a charismatic leader may lose control over his personality cult and movement.

⁸⁵ Marshal Ye Jianying, quoted in Geremie Barme, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1996), 27.

5 HO CHI MINH

Ho Chi Minh's cult of personality is less discussed in the academic literature in comparison to the cult of Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong. The most notable biographies on Ho briefly mention his cult of personality but does not specifically focus on the process in which Ho was deified. How did Ho display his charismatic virtues? How did he obtain recognition from people and build his charismatic movement? Did the personality cult give him godlike powers to dictate national policies? Similar to the cults of Kim and Mao, the cult of Ho provides a puzzle to the field's understanding of the cult of personality as a strategic power enhancing tool. The historical literature examined provides support for the hypothesis that Ho, though at the center of a personality cult which revered him, did not have unilateral decision-making powers. Despite his status as the nation's sagacious "Uncle Ho," he came into conflict with fellow party leaders' decisions regarding national policies such as land reform and military tactics during the Vietnam War. The purpose of this portion of the thesis is to explore the complexities of how Ho the man became Bác Ho or "Uncle Ho" of the nation.

Much of Ho Chi Minh's (He who Enlightens⁸⁶ or Ho the Most Enlightened⁸⁷) life before 1941, when he returned to Vietnam after a decade abroad, is uncertain and unknown. Ho lived in several countries throughout the course of his life, assuming a speculated 50 to 200 pseudonyms and producing writings in a variety of languages including English, French, Chinese, and Russian.⁸⁸ Ho became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's Prime Minister from 1945-1955 and President from 1945 to his death in 1969.⁸⁹ In this section of the thesis, I describe the

⁸⁶ Peter Neville, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2019), 1.

⁸⁷ Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941* (United States: University of California Press, 2002), 1.

⁸⁸ Dennis Duncanson, "Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong 1931 – 1932," *China Quarterly* 57 (2009): 85.

⁸⁹ William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 2.

evolution of Ho's cult of personality, his rise as a revolutionary leader, his rivalry with younger party colleagues (namely First Secretary Le Duan), and the institutionalization of Ho's personality cult by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) for its benefits.

To understand the creation and evolution of the cult of Ho, it is critical to contextualize Ho's early childhood. The official year of Ho's birth as promulgated by the Vietnamese government is 1890.⁹⁰ Ho was born into a time of general societal distress amongst the colonized peoples of French Indochina due to gross economic disparity, the psychological and emotional effects of colonization, and civil conflicts. Chapter one of David Halberstam's *Ho* provides a concise description of the brewing anti-French and anti-colonial sentiments during the late 19th century. Ho Chi Minh, born as Nguyen Sinh Cung in a small village called Kim Lien, took the name Nguyen Tat Thanh at age 10 in accordance with Vietnamese customs.⁹¹ Ho's brother, Khiem, was a militant nationalist.⁹² His father, Nguyen Sinh Sac, belonged to a world of academics and scholars, and had encouraged Ho to study French.⁹³ Sac was friends with the nationalist Phan Boi Chau who imparted long lasting advice on the young Ho before being exiled to China. "Those who wish to liberate the country will have to form a strong party."⁹⁴

5.1 Ho Chi Minh Abroad: The First Signs of Charismatic Virtues and the Beginnings of A Movement

From 1911 – 1941, Ho Chi Minh vanished from Vietnam, but it was during his time abroad that he displayed to the international community the virtues of his charismatic leadership

⁹⁰ "Biography of Ho Chi Minh," Communist Party of Vietnam, May 7, 2015, <https://english.hochiminh.vn/life-and-cause/biography-of-ho-chi-minh-328>.

⁹¹ Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

⁹² Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*, trans. Peter Wiles and Jane Seitz (New York: Random House Publishing, 1968), 15.

⁹³ Lacouture refers to Ho's father as Nguyen Sinh Huy.

⁹⁴ Lacouture, 16.

such as political persuasion skills, possessing a powerful vision, a sense of mission, and the projection of self-confidence. During his time abroad Ho became entrenched in the ideologies Marxist-Leninism and rose through the ranks of the Communist International (Comintern). In France, he adopted the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Quoc ('Nguyen the Patriot' or literally, 'Nguyen who loves his country')⁹⁵ and became involved with the French Left. He displayed his communication skills by contributing to *L'Humanité*, *Le Populaire*, and *La Vie Ouvrière*, three left leaning French newspapers. He was the first Annamese member to join the *Jeunesses socialistes* (the Young Socialist) movement.⁹⁶ During the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919, Ho, on behalf of the *Groupe des Patriotes Annamites* (Group of Patriotic Annamites), boldly sent an eight-point plan for his country's emancipation to the American Secretary of State Robert Lansing as well as other attending delegations.⁹⁷ The eight-point plan, inspired by American President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, also appeared in *L'Humanité*. As the great powers dictated the new world order after World War I, Ho Chi Minh laid out his vision for French Indochina and his people in the following translated version of his eight-point plan:

1. General amnesty for all native political prisoners;
2. Reform Indochinese justice by granting the natives the same judicial guarantees as were enjoyed by the Europeans;
3. Freedom of the press and opinion;
4. Freedom of association;
5. Freedom of emigration and foreign travel;
6. Freedom of instruction and the creation in all provinces of technical and professional schools for indigenous people;
7. Replacement of rule by decree by rule of law;
8. Election of a permanent Vietnamese delegation to the French Parliament, to keep it informed of the wishes of the indigenous people.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Quinn-Judge, 11.

⁹⁶ Lacourture, 21.

⁹⁷ "Letter from Nguyen Ai Quoc [Ho Chi Minh] to Secretary of State Robert Lansing" (with enclosure); 6/18/1919; 851G.00; General Records, 1918 - 1931; Records of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, Record Group 256; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5049414>.

⁹⁸ Translation of eight points from French to English provided by Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1914 – 1941* (United States: University of California Press, 2002), 12.

He increasingly took up the movement for independence of colonized peoples while establishing a reputation for himself as Nguyen Ai Quoc. Ho's political activities placed him under close surveillance by the French police who speculated that Ho had frequent contacts with other Irish, Chinese, and Korean nationalists who also came to Paris to lobby the great powers.⁹⁹

In Bui Lam's book *Souvenirs sur Ho Chi Minh (Recollections of Ho Chi Minh)*, he wrote:

“At Versailles, where the imperialists were sharing the colonial cake, a Vietnamese called Nguyen Ai Quoc had made an unheralded demand for self-determination in Vietnam. To us, it was like a flash of lightning, the first thunderclap of spring...Here was a Vietnamese insisting that his people be accorded their rights. We took our hats off to him. No two Vietnamese residing in France could meet, after this, without mentioning the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc.”¹⁰⁰

In December 1920, Ho became a founding member of the French Communist Party after he voted on behalf of the Indochinese Socialist Group and the 13th Section of the Socialist Revolutionary Federation of the Seine to join Lenin's Committee for the Third International, also known as Communist International or Comintern.¹⁰¹ He eventually published an article in 1960 titled “The Path that Led Me to Leninism” to explain why he decided to join Comintern. Ho's formative years abroad clarified his vision for his revolutionary movement.

“At first, patriotism, not yet Communism led me to have confidence in Lenin, in the Third International. Step by step, along the struggle, by studying Marxism-Leninism parallel with participation in practical activities, I gradually came upon the fact that only Socialism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery...Leninism is not only a miraculous ‘book of the wise,’ a compass for us Vietnamese revolutionaries and people: it is also the radiant sun illuminating our path to final victory, to Socialism and Communism.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Quinn-Judge, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Bui Lam, quoted in Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*, trans. Peter Wiles and Jane Seitz (New York: Random House Publishing, 1968), 25.

¹⁰¹ Quinn-Judge, 31.

¹⁰² Ho Chi Minh, quoted in Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*, trans. Peter Wiles and Jane Seitz (New York: Random House Publishing, 1968), 32.

By the early 1920s, Ho founded the League of the Oppressed Asian Peoples, founded and edited the publication *La Paria* as an educational and agitation tool for the anti-imperialist struggle, and became a leading figure of the French Communist Party.¹⁰³ In 1923, Ho clandestinely departed Paris for Moscow where he trained as a revolutionary at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, wrote reports on Vietnam for Comintern, and contributed to Pravda, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁴ In Summer of 1924, Ho capitalized on the gathering of international communist leaders at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern to display his oratorical skills while directing their attention to the plight of colonized peoples. In one of his speeches, he stated:

“In all the French colonies, famine is on the increase and so is the people’s hatred. The native peasants are ripe for insurrection. In many colonies, they have risen many times but their uprisings have all been drowned in blood. If at present the peasants still have a passive attitude, the reason is that they still lack organization and leaders. The Communist International must help them to revolution and liberation.”¹⁰⁵

Ho’s speeches at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern marked the beginning of his international recognition as a charismatic and revolutionary leader. The young, fiery revolutionary was not shy about scolding international leaders on the plight of the colonized peoples. In another speech at the Fifth Congress, Ho stated:

“It seems to me that the comrades do not entirely comprehend the fact that the fate of the world proletariat, and especially the fate of the proletarian class in aggressive countries that have invaded colonies, is closely tied to the fate of the oppressed peoples of the colonies.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ William Warbey, *Ho Chi Minh and the Struggle for an Independent Vietnam* (Merlin Press: London, 1972), 28.

¹⁰⁴ Duiker, 92.

¹⁰⁵ Ho Chi Minh, quoted in William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 100.

¹⁰⁶ Duiker, 99.

He was irked by the lack of the Comintern's actions to liberate colonized peoples, especially those in French Indochina. His vision of a free and independent Indochina had to be carried out through his efforts.

In November 1924, Ho was sent by Moscow to Canton to undertake in revolutionary action. Ho, under the pseudonyms Ly Thuy and Mr. Vuong, began to build Robert Tucker's idea of a charismatic movement in Canton, China. Canton was a revolutionary center for Vietnamese nationalists and exiled rebels. The city was near Vietnam's northern borders and housed exiled nationalist Phan Boi Chau who attracted other exiled revolutionaries. The extremist and younger members of Chau's revolutionary group became disillusioned by Chau's lack of ideology and branched out to form the Tam Tam Xa (Society of Beating Hearts).¹⁰⁷ Ho targeted his efforts to transform the Tam Tam Xa into a new Communist Group based on Marxist-Leninist ideology under his leadership. He succeeded in 1925 with the founding of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League (Hoi Viet Nam Cach Mang Thanh Nien or Thanh Nien) with Ho Tung Mau and Le Hong Phong, two Vietnamese revolutionaries.¹⁰⁸ Ho also established the publication *Thanh Nien* to disperse the league's ideas throughout China and French Indochina as a form of communication propaganda. After establishing Thanh Nien, Ho imparted his followers with specific tasks such as create party cells in French Indochina or receive military training through Moscow.

Ho eventually fled from Canton to Moscow to avoid capture by Chiang Kai-shek's troops which were arresting known communists in Canton. In 1928, Ho traveled to Siam, utilized the pseudonym Father Chin, and established a new headquarters for Thanh Nien with the hopes of expanding Comintern's networks in Southeast Asia. He traveled throughout Siam in simple

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 121; Lacouture, 48.

clothing, establishing local cells and advising members to appeal to the local population as well radical youths to broaden international support for his planned revolutionary movement. Ho understood the importance of his image and the image of local Vietnamese in Siam for garnering international support for Vietnamese nationalist movement. He made himself an example for the Vietnamese merchants in Siam by learning Thai and participating in physical labor to construct a local school.¹⁰⁹ He brought stories and news of the international revolutionary movement to local villages and Thanh Nien cells in Siam. He was a simple yet educated and well-traveled man, a man that people could simultaneously relate to and idolize. He was *the* charismatic leader.

Meanwhile, without its leader, Thanh Nien fractured into three factions due to ideological differences – the Communist Party of Annam, Revolutionary Party of the New Vietnam, and League of Indochinese Communists. Ho was preoccupied with preparing and directing communist organizations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Siam as well as communicating with the French Communist Party, the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai, and the Anti-Imperialist League. He was a prominent figure regarding East Asia affairs and the leaders of the Comintern knew that Ho could unite the three factions. In February 1930, Ho met the representatives of each faction in Hong Kong and organized the factions under one party, the Vietnamese Communist Party (Dan Cong San Vietnam) which was later renamed to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) at Comintern's request.¹¹⁰ Ho understood how to tap into people's anti-colonial sentiments and sense of distress as a rallying call. At the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party, he declared:

¹⁰⁹ Duiker, 152.

¹¹⁰ Lacouture, 58.

“The French imperialists’ inhuman oppression and exploitation have helped our people realize that with revolution we will survive and without revolution we will die.”¹¹¹

The ability of Ho to lead and unite the three factions under one party with a common cause is evidence of his charismatic prowess and influence. By 1930, Ho had a firm grasp on his charismatic movement. Ho returned to Vietnam in 1941 and established an ICP base at Pac Bo, a small village near the borders of China and northern Vietnam. From May 10 – 19, 1941, Ho presided over the eight plenum of the Central Committee of the ICP in Pac Bo.¹¹² During this time, the League for Vietnamese Independence (Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh or Viet Minh for short) was established. In 1942, Ho adopted the Chinese name Ho Chi Minh as he crossed over into China with the goals of meeting Chiang Kai-shek to secure his support for the Viet Minh against growing Japanese aggression and to reopen communications with the Chinese Communist Party. Ho was arrested by Chiang’s officers and relocated to different prisons until his release in 1943. After his release, Ho Chi Minh, financially supported by the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, organized and led the Viet Minh to drive out Japanese forces. He proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on September 2, 1945.

5.2 A Moderate in A Revolution

By 1950, the Viet Minh increasingly relied on the Chinese Communist Party for support in the war against the French. Ho’s power was beginning to wane at the Second Party Congress in 1951 as Chinese influence grew. The DRV adopted a number of reforms to please their Chinese benefactors, including land reforms and a cleanse of party leadership. At the Second Party Congress, Mao Zedong Thought was endorsed in Ho’s political report as one of the pillars

¹¹¹ Ho Chi Minh, quoted in Peter DeCaro, *Rhetoric of Revolt: Ho Chi Minh’s Discourse for Revolution* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 1.

¹¹² Lacouture, 74.

of the DRV's ideology.¹¹³ Chinese advisers poured into the DRV and sought to instill the Maoist model of revolution onto the Viet Minh. Ideological differences between communist Chinese advisors and many nationalist Viet Minh who had little exposure to Marxist-Leninism created a rift in the Viet Minh as some soldiers deserted the army or committed suicide and many senior to mid-level officers deemed too nationalist were purged.¹¹⁴

Furthermore, stringent land reforms were encouraged by Chinese advisors to eliminate the influence of local elites. The DRV's original land reform program involved confiscating farmland from French citizens and Vietnamese collaborators of the Bao Dai regime. The land of patriotic landlords and rich peasants were not seized in the interest of maintaining their support for the nationalist movement. However, Chinese advisers urged stricter enforcement of rent reductions by landlords and limitations on the participation of landlords in the villages. Some party leaders took this as a cue to go against Ho's initial land reform programs. Notably, General Secretary Truong Chinh agreed that Ho's initial program did not serve the interests of the revolutionary movement. To win over the support of rural poor, Truong Chinh and other influential party leaders promoted harsher land reform strategies such as seizure of all farmlands whose landlords were not cooperating in the war effort, public tribunals for landlords who were accused of oppressing the peasants, and dramatic cuts in land rents.

Land reform became a point of contention again in 1953 as the Viet Minh prepared for the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Chinese advisers and other more radical party leaders such as Truong Chinh and Hoang Quoc urged for more stringent land regulations as a means of mobilizing the poor to increase grain production, destroying the old feudal system, and paving the way for collective farms. Ho reluctantly agreed to implement the "land to tiller" program as

¹¹³ Quinn-Judge, 10.

¹¹⁴ Duiker, 436.

means of pleasing Beijing though he told confidants that he was “in no hurry” to enact the policy.¹¹⁵ The land reform campaign was launched in 1954. There were complaints of coercion and brutality, but Ho Chi Minh could only scold his underlings. Violence erupted from the land reforms as waves of class anger spilled across the country’s peasants. Even those who were loyal to the Viet Minh’s cause were also accused and executed. Ho Chi Minh repeatedly expressed opposition to the indiscriminate violence and torture. He stated:

“It [torture] is a savage method used by imperialists, capitalists and feudal elements to master the masses and the revolution. Why must we, who are in possession of a just program and a just rationale, make use of such brutal methods?”¹¹⁶

Ho’s condemnations against brutal techniques went unheard. Fractures were forming amongst the upper echelons of decision-making as Ho was increasingly seen as too moderate for the revolutionary cause. According to Duiker, though Ho was displeased with the mass indiscriminate violence occurring across the countryside, he could not voice his opinions for risk of offending Beijing during a time in which the Viet Minh desperately needed Beijing’s unwavering support. William Duiker stated, “Perhaps the most that can be said is that Ho Chi Minh had become a prisoner of his own creation, a fly in amber, unable in his state of declining influence to escape the inexorable logic of a system that sacrificed the fate of individuals to the ‘higher mortality’ of the master plan.”¹¹⁷

Despite being the revered Uncle of the nation, Ho’s policies and his desires for peace through diplomacy in the Vietnam War did not win against Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, two young hard-liners within the VCP. According to historian Lien-Hang Nguyen’s interview with Hoang Chinh Minh, a former ideologist for the VCP,

¹¹⁵ Duiker, 475.

¹¹⁶ Ho Chi Minh, quoted in William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 478.

¹¹⁷ Duiker, 491.

“Since Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, and a now rehabilitated Truong Chinh had resolved to adopt violence Maoist revolutionary methods in order to expand the war in the South, peaceful coexistence became synonymous with revisionism...Le Duan was the main architect of the resolution, even though nearly half of the Politburo supported peaceful coexistence. The hardliners silenced the more moderate Politburo members with threats and blackmail, including sidelining President Ho Chi Minh at the Ninth Plenum by invoking his past discretions. In fact, Le Duan presented Ho with the option of ‘following the Politburo line or standing aside’ at the plenum.”¹¹⁸

At the Ninth Plenum of the VWP Central Committee in 1963, Le Duan capitalized on the ‘theory of two mistakes’ – Ho’s 1945 compromise with the French which led to the French trying to re-establish colonial rule and the 1954 Geneva Conference which divided the country – to sideline and shame the aging, moderate leader into accepting the hard-liners’ tactics.¹¹⁹ By this time, it was clear that Ho no longer had effective decision-making powers over national policies in the DRV. His role was to unite the people under the cult of Ho while the younger, more radical party members ran the show.

5.3 The Role of Text in Creating A Personality Cult

As evident from Ho’s prolific writing career before his return to Vietnam in 1941, text played an important role in creating the personality cult. Historian Olga Dror argued that Ho, having studied how Stalin created his personality cult, was aware of the influential role of texts in the creation of the personality cult.¹²⁰ The first major book which laid the foundation for establishing Ho’s cult of personality is *Những mẫu chuyện về đời hoạt động của Hồ Chủ Tịch* (*Vignettes/Glimpses of President Ho’s Life and Activities*), attributed to Tran Dan Tien.¹²¹ Tran

¹¹⁸ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 66-67.

¹¹⁹ Martin Grossheim, “‘Revisionism’ in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: New Evidence from the East German Archives,” *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005): 5.

¹²⁰ Olga Dror, “Establishing Ho Chi Minh Cult: Vietnamese Traditions and Their Transformation,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2 (2016).

¹²¹ Dror, 436.

claimed that he first saw Ho when the leader was proclaiming Vietnamese independence at Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi in 1945. Ho declined Tran's request to document the revolutionary leader's life, but Tran was able to publish *Vignettes* from interviewing those who knew of Ho.¹²² *Vignettes* highlighted Ho's history as a worker, first as a sailor and then as a laborer, while minimizing his academics-related family background and ties to bourgeois anti-colonialists in Paris.¹²³ Some historians speculate that Tran Dan Tien was Ho who published an autobiography under a pseudonym in order to make his name and cause known to the international sphere and garner support for Vietnamese independence. Olga Dror argued that the existence of innermost thoughts and personal details in Ho's early biographies, *Vignettes* and another early biography, *Biography of President Ho (Tiểu Sử Chủ Tịch Hồ Chí Minh)* by Tran Ngoc Danh, implies that Ho either revealed details in support of the writer or personally penned these books under a pseudonym.¹²⁴ Either way, these books were during the 1950s when Ho was at the height of political power, and neither he nor the party stopped the publications of these books which heavily contributed to the creation of his cult of personality.

However, Nguyen Khoi, former deputy director of the Secretariat of the National Assembly, argued that Ho, who just proclaimed independence for his people, was too busy with the War of Resistance against the French to pen an autobiography. Following the August Revolution in 1945 by the Viet Minh, Ho issued the Proclamation of Independence of the DRV and petitioned President Harry S Truman for American support of Vietnamese independence against France.¹²⁵ According to Nguyen Khoi, a member of the Party Central Committee and the

¹²² Ibid., 437.

¹²³ Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Ho Chi Minh: Alive and Well in Post-revolutionary Vietnam," *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, 9.

¹²⁴ Dror, 443. Sophie Quinn-Judge also believe that Ho penned *Vignettes*.

¹²⁵ "Document for February 28th: Letter from Ho Chi Minh to President Harry S. Truman," Feb. 28, 1946, <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=228>.

Minister of Propaganda arranged for a written book about Ho so that the party could make Ho's name known to the world. *Vignettes* was translated into French and Chinese and was supposed to elevate the status of Ho in the eyes of French and Chinese citizens and the Vietnamese diaspora.¹²⁶ By the late 1940s, a time when people knew little about the movement for Vietnamese independence, it was advantageous for the DRV to place Ho on a pedestal as a charismatic leader fighting for the people rather than a policy or program. On the international sphere, Ho was to be a charismatic revolutionary who came from a modest background and sacrificed his life for the independence of his country and his people. Domestically, Ho was to be revered as the staunch revolutionary hero whose leadership of the Viet Minh defeated the French and proclaimed independence.

5.4 The Posthumous Cult of Ho Chi Minh

Perhaps the most tragic example of Ho's inability to wield the power of his cult of personality is rooted in the events surrounding his death in 1969. The Communist Party encouraged Ho Chi Minh Thought like that of Mao Zedong Thought in an attempt to further elevate the status of Ho while maintaining obedience to the state through obedience to Ho Chi Minh Thought. Ho's last testament described his wishes to be cremated, his ashes spread across the beautiful country he fought for, and his bones divided and buried in North, Central, and South Vietnam so that he may be accessible to all inhabitants of Vietnam. It is customary belief in Vietnam that a proper burial allows for the spirit to rest at peace. Ironically, the Politburo denied Ho's last wishes while urging Vietnamese to study Ho Chi Minh Thought. Le Duan asked

¹²⁶ Dror, 439.

the Soviet Union to embalm Uncle Ho's body to protect the physical man who symbolized national unity and state reverence.¹²⁷

The Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, inspired by Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow, is one of Hanoi's most visited attraction for domestic and foreign tourists.¹²⁸ Nearby, one can also visit President Ho's modest Stilt House, a simple living and workspace located right behind the grandiose of the Presidential Palace. During the Vietnam War, the DRV was enduring intense economic hardships because of constant American bombings. Ho's preference for his smaller, wooden house compared to the grandeur of the Presidential Palace conveyed to the Vietnamese people that top officials shared in their suffering but was united and dedicated to the fight for complete independence. Today, the imagery associated with the Stilt House conveys to tourists the mythical past of a truly modest, "man of the people."

Pierre Brocheux, a historian of Vietnam, argued that Ho was imprisoned by the Politburo which isolated him on a pedestal to be revered while party leaders utilized the cult of Ho to commit endless cycles of violence.¹²⁹ Olga Dror best summarized the main difference between Ho and other cults of personality.

"Thus, Ho Chi Minh's cult presents a special case. It was not like Lenin's cult, which was rooted in the cult of the Party...It was not like Stalin's cult, because Stalin moved to its center while still alive to use it for the sake of his own power. Ho Chi Minh's cult trajectory was the opposite – he developed his cult to mobilize the country to carry out Party and government decisions. Gradually, the Party took over his cult, keeping Ho Chi Minh as its representation."¹³⁰

Why did Ho gradually lose his power? Perhaps it was due to his reliance on Beijing as the conflicts in Vietnam escalated which showed his colleagues that he was not and could not be

¹²⁷ Dror, 457-460.

¹²⁸ Neville, 13.

¹²⁹ Brocheux, 179-180.

¹³⁰ Dror, 446.

an invincible dictator. Perhaps it was age. Similar to Kim Il Sung whose aging health led to a decline in agency, Ho was experiencing health issues for which he sought treatment in China. This kept him from being immersed in political discussions and decision-making throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps Ho truly believed in the idea of collectivized leadership, or most likely, it was a combination of these factors that eventually led to the manipulation of Ho's cult by his party.

After Ho's death in 1969, Le Duan pushed for collectivized leadership within the VWP rather than promoting his own cult of personality. Why did Le Duan not push to establish his cult of personality? One of the underlying motives of routinization of charisma is ensuring security of one's position of authority, social prestige, and economic advantages. There was no need for Le Duan to be the successor to Ho's personality cult since he already had real political power and authority in his capacity as First Secretary of the VWP. More importantly, by continuing to elevate Ho Chi Minh, the party avoids dealing with the problem of succession in what Weber would call the routinization of charisma. Ho did not have an immediate heir. There is little known information about his family. He often said that he was married to the country. He was a man who had devoted his life to the cause of his people or children, a man who sacrificed family for the independence of his people. His lack of immediate family members allowed Ho to truly portray the image of the father of the nation.

In 2021, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam continues to manage the cult of Ho for its pragmatic benefits. After Ho's death, the party realized it was more difficult for the government to connect to the people without him. A new generation was going to grow up without seeing and hearing the charismatic Ho Chi Minh. The party maintains a robust website with curated

collections of Uncle Ho's writings, documentaries on his life, and audio recordings of Ho.¹³¹ So long as the party can maintain Ho's body, never granting him a proper burial and forcing the spirit of Uncle Ho to wander endlessly, it can be sure of its connection to the people of Vietnam.

¹³¹ See <https://hochiminh.vn>.

6 CONCLUSION

The cult of personality literature depicts the charismatic cult leader as an all-power omniscient deity who can unilaterally dictate national policies. The thesis re-examined the utility of the cult of personality as a strategic power enhancing tool through a comparative cross-national multi-case study of three Asian leaders – Kim Il Sung, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh. The thesis found that as these three Asian leaders' image became increasingly deified, their godlike powers, operationalized as unilateral decision-making powers over national policies, peaked and eventually started declining.

In the case of Kim Il Sung, the leader was a ruthless dictator, implementing constant party purges to remove party rivals. He was at the height of his political power and had begun forming a cult of personality when his image was manipulated by close associates, namely his son Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Il manipulated his father's cult of personality to flatter his father and steal the seat for succession from his uncle by turning Kim Il Sung, the war hero, into Kim Il Sung, the omniscient deity, through communication propaganda. As Kim Jong Il became increasingly engrained in the day-to-day business of the party, Kim Il Sung's powers over national policies declined despite his increasingly godlike image. In the case of Mao Zedong, Mao was able to capitalize on the powers of the cult of personality to a certain extent. He mobilized the Red Guards to attain political power over the existing party membership, but ultimately needed military assistance to control the Red Guards' destructive nature. In the case of Ho Chi Minh, despite being revered as the nation's beloved Uncle Ho, he did not have real decision-making powers over national policies after his perceived two-mistakes. Ho was placed on a pedestal and his image increasingly revered and deified as his political power over national policies declined. The political struggles and experiences of the three men challenges the

theoretical understanding that the object of a cult of personality possesses godlike powers. These men embodied the deity who reigned but did not rule over his kingdom.

The case studies focused on Asian leaders in nondemocratic, revolutionary regimes; thereby, limiting the generalizations of the findings to nondemocratic, revolutionary regimes in Asia. I hope to expand on the thesis in the future by utilizing the established analytical framework within the existing thesis to examine the utility of the cult of personality in other regions of the world and in traditionally democratic states. Considering that democratic leaders have also engendered personality cults, the field of political science's understanding on the cult of personality can benefit from a comparative approach to how the cult of personality operates in nondemocratic versus democratic states. An interesting case study for future research is Donald Trump's personality cult in America. What factors of American society allowed for the rise of Trumpism? How is the cult of Trump different or similar to those of the Kims, Mao, or Ho? Trump's incitement of the January 6, 2021 riots at the United States Capitol parallels Mao's calls for the Red Gaurds to destroy the "old order." Yet, resistance against Trump's policies from within his administration parallels Ho's struggles against the CPV during his final years.

I also hope to incorporate more primary resources in future scholarship as archives re-open and more materials become available with increasing temporal distance. There are still many questions to be explored such as the implications of Khrushchev's destalinization campaign on each men's personality cult and how Vietnam continues to maintain the cult of Ho with an increasingly cosmopolitan youth. These questions and the main ones I have laid out in this thesis are a starting point for re-examining and building our understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon known as the cult of personality.

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