Kim Il Sung celebrated his 80th birthday in April 1992,* the last surviving dictator of a ‘Communist’ country with the last surviving cult of personality. Fragile though North Korea’s future may be, and hard though life continues to be for many of its people, his was still a considerable achievement. Certainly he had used the tools of repression with ruthless skill. Certainly he owed much at the start to the supporting hand of the Soviet Union. And certainly China saved him from extinction at an early stage.

For the past two decades and more it has been hard to see Kim’s real features through the clouds of a suffocating cult. Yet there must have been more to his career than the mere use of force and the secret police. It will be suggested here that Kim was able to tap and exploit a deep vein of insecurity and self-doubt among the Korean people arising from their historical subjugation first by China and then by Japan. He appealed to the sense of shame of the Korean nation. He denounced his enemies as ‘flunkies’ to a foreign power – it did not much matter which one.

Against the crime of ‘flunkeyism’ he counter-posed the spirit of juche – the doctrine that man (and particularly Korean man) is ‘master of his resources’. This appeal had probably lost most of its genuine attraction by the mid-1980s. The doctrine had become routine. The economic gains had been squandered on empty projects. Even a well-sealed society could not remain immune from changes abroad. The succession – in the dubious person of his son, Kim Jong Il – caused elite dissension and required an even more extravagant ritual of political cult. But the charade of North Korean political culture by this time should not distract attention from its earlier more genuine features. We understand very well how Mao played on the ambivalent feelings of the Chinese people towards social order and disorder. Stalin’s self-projection as mythical Russian father figure is also well understood. The secret of Kim’s appeal is more elusive, but this essay seeks to explore an important aspect of it.

* Editor’s note: This paper was first published in 1993. Kim Il Sung died in July 1994.
Let me begin with a speech by Kim from 1965 on the subject of ‘revolutionizing’ Korea’s intellectuals. After Marxism-Leninism, he said, opposition to ‘flunkeyism’ should be the most important aspect of education and scientific work:

As you know, geographically speaking, our country is situated among the Soviet Union, China and Japan. These adjacent countries are all big countries, with larger territories and populations than ours... Therefore, unless our country joins advanced nations by quickly developing its science and technology, flunkeyism towards these neighbouring countries will remain in our people’s minds...

From old times, our country [has been] known as a golden garden for its beautiful mountains and clear rivers; it has rich natural resources though the territory is small. Ours is an industrious people with refined sentiments, outstanding talent and sturdy will. They have a long history and [rich] cultural traditions. Why should such a wise people as we blindly admire and worship others?

Even after the world-wide victory of communism, the Koreans will live in Korea. Why should we leave the golden garden of three thousand ri and live in an alien land? We must exploit our inexhaustible natural resources and build a wonderful paradise in this land where our people will live through all generations.¹

THE LEGACY OF SHAME

During fifty years (1895–1945), first under Japanese influence, then as a Japanese colony, Korea produced many brave patriots and revolutionaries who suffered discrimination, imprisonment or death. Yet liberation was achieved at a time when the resistance both internally and across the Manchurian frontier was quelled. A people whose sense of united nationhood dated back a thousand years to the beginning of the Koryô dynasty in 918 had become passive and guilty. Korea was adjacent to its colonizers and therefore more easily subdued than most nations elsewhere. In 1937 some 21 million Koreans were ruled by nearly a quarter of a million Japanese with only 63,000 Koreans in subordinate positions. Industry and commerce was also dominated by Japan, through the triad of the government, the banks, and the big zaibatsu houses of Mitsubishi and other familiar names.²

On 1 March 1919, two months before similar events in Beijing, Korean students led a wave of demonstrations for independence in all the major Korean cities. Independence, said the declaration signed that afternoon in a Seoul restaurant, was the only way forward ‘if we are to deliver our children from the painful heritage of shame ...’. Japan had broken many solemn treaties and had shown contempt for Korea’s civilization, but ‘[w]e, who have greater cause to reprimand ourselves, need not spend time in finding fault with others ...’.³ The note of self-reproach is characteristic.

The post-war rekindling of Korean nationalism led to the ‘cultural policy’ – an easing of direct Japanese rule which allowed some hope of independence in the far future. But Japan’s hand was too heavy to encourage a significant national bourgeoisie of the type which emerged in China. Small nationalist