



somewhere between the leader's look of indifference and the punctuation mark his hand has drawn: he does not look like someone who has just inserted an exclamation mark. As for his indifference, perhaps the reason for it is the small pile of documents beside him, likely awaiting his signature. The sticky page marker adhering to his left hand testifies to the status of the document to which he is presently attending – nothing special.

We are familiar with this type of indifference: it is that of the bureaucrat, a person who, in any case, is an unlikely deployer of exclamation marks. That incongruity puts into doubt the iconography of temporal progression implied on the page. Accordingly, we venture a hypothesis: could it be that this bureaucratic indifference belongs to someone who is only accustomed to the failures of the type of test fight which he is in the middle of authorizing; whereas the exclamation mark belongs to someone who has already seen an exception to that bureaucratic repetition? If true, the actual temporal progression is the reverse: the alleged scene of the leader's written authorization was retroactively "recovered" *after* the successful test.

From this labor of "recovery" on the part of *Rodong sinmun*, we surmise the unmatched priority of the leader's writing. The message seems clear: the leader shall write a new epoch into being. My argument in this paper builds on this "message." These images attest not only to Kim Jung-un's "writing" of the missile into being. They also bear witness to the birth of a legitimate *su-ryong* (supreme leader). For the nation's *su-ryong* are historically defined by their signature work of authorship: Kim Il-sung by the texts of "*Juche* philosophy,"<sup>2</sup> Kim Jong-il by those on "*Songun* ideology" (officially translated as "army-first politics")<sup>3</sup> and "*Juche* art," and now Kim Jung-un by the so-called "bomb of *Juche*." Writing or authoring by *su-ryong* not only generates a body of text. It is also a speech act of sorts, specifically, an oath-taking. Here I use the term "oath-taking" in the ancient "Indo-European" sense (Benveniste 2016[[1073]: 399, 440-8).<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the credence of sworn words is said to be vouchsafed by "grasp(ing) firmly" at a material object – a "wand of authority" – which is to kill the perjurer (443). That "wand of authority" for the *su-ryong* traditionally is "the gun" (*chongdae*), the ICBM being one of its manifestations (Kim 2000; Kim 2004; Rhee and Shim 2002; Seo and Kim 2002). Without "the gun," a leader is neither a writer nor a *su-ryong*, strictly speaking. Hence the urgency of the ICBM for Kim

---

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive discussion on the difference between "philosophy" (철학) and "ideology" (사상) in the context of "*Juche*" (often dubbed "self-reliance"), see (Kim 2012: 65-89).

<sup>3</sup> "*Songun*" and "army-first politics" are, respectively, a term and a translated form of this term that have been used in official North Korean texts since 2003 (조선중앙통신 2007. 10. 20; *Korea Today* 2003; Seo 2008: 93). The first instance of the usage of this term was in *Rodong sinmun* 2001 (November 8). The officialization of this term since 2003 seems to have been in response to the derisive connotation of "militarism" in the customary translation outside North Korea (including South Korea), "military-first policy."

<sup>4</sup> See below for the reason for this particular borrowing.

Jung-un.<sup>5</sup> By this “writing” of the ICBM, he became the legitimate *su-ryong* of this nation. Thus the *su-ryong*-writing-ICBM schema essentially informs the nature of the present regime’s power. No subsequent inquiry into the nation’s contemporary politics can afford to ignore this inextricable associational trinity.

### **Whither Anthropology?**

What can anthropology – as characterized in the present special issue’s call – say about this ternary schema and the regime of political power configured by it? I ask this question not to add yet more knowledge, an anthropological knowledge, about North Korea. I ask it rather so as to interrogate *anthropology*, with North Korea’s newly acquired, ICBM-adorned figure of power as our methodological object.

Let me anticipate the points to follow. An ICBM’s power is a technoscientific fact, one which we can apprehend through an array of metrics – measurable speed, distance, elevation, accuracy, magnitude of impact, etc. Its

---

<sup>5</sup> This said, it is also the case that a *su-ryong* inherits the authorships of preceding *su-ryong* in a cumulative fashion. This is because “the gun” is deemed an immutable element through history, whose eternal relevance is co-constitutive with all the imperialisms (*jaegukjuoui*) of the world (Kim 2012: 159; Kim 2008). And this “immutable element,” in turn, stems from the nation’s recapitulatory historicity, whereby the nation’s historical “starting point” (*chulbaljŏm.*) is deemed omnipresent in all historical times. From the point of view of a *su-ryong*, the “starting point” is both that of authority and a substantive part of the genealogical person (the successor), thus both “nomonological” and “ontological” (Derrida 1996: 1-6). Thus, every starting point is two-faced and two-timed. I have presented the relevant analysis as a colloquium talk titled “Untimely North Korea” (Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, April 9, 2018). To give one example from that analysis, Kim Il-sung’s works, under the name “*Juche* philosophy,” constitute a philosophical historiography of sorts which broadly situates the birth of this nation within the history of humanity itself. At the “starting point,” the text splits into two, paradoxically describing the moment when Kim Il-sung creates the “ontology” of the very text – in a manner reminiscent of M. C. Escher’s well-known lithograph of a hand drawing another hand. Provisionally put, the two “moments” are equivalent to the first two images of *Rodongsinmun* referred to above, those of Kim Jung-un at his desk and of his handwriting respectively.

위대한 수령 김일성동지와  
위대한 령도자 김정일동지  
혁명사상만세!

# 로동신문

조선로동당 중앙위원회 기관지  
제186호 [후계 제25695호] 주제106 (2017)년 7월 5일 (수요일)

당의 령도따라 내 나라,  
내 조국을 더욱 부강하게 하기  
위해 힘차게 일해나가자!

## 우리 당과 국가, 군대의 최고령도자 김정은동지께서 대륙간탄도로켓 《화성-14》형시험발사를 단행할데 대한 명령 하달



우리 당과 국가, 군대의 최고령도자 김정은동지께서 주제106 (2017)년 7월 3일 대륙간탄도로켓 《화성-14》형시험발사를 단행할데 대하여 진밀명령하시였다.

대륙간탄도로켓 《화성-14》형  
(시험사준비물)을 출낸 정황과  
대륙 보고  
10월 3  
조선민주주의인민공화국  
2017년 7월 5일



Figure 1. The front page of the July 5, 2017 issue of *Rodong sinmun*.

spatial reach is planetary in scale, while the temporality of its aftereffects is, when armed with a nuclear warhead, immeasurable. A regime of political power configured by an ICBM is made up of these facts *plus* the sworn words lent credence by this “wand of authority” (towards threatening, diplomacy, etc.).

This poses a novel challenge for studies of North Korea: with the ICBM's planet-encompassing mobility, the nation oft-nicknamed "the most isolated country in the world" has now come to lay claim to a distinctly "ecumenical" magnitude of virtual influence. How to make sense of such a power, which is at once "isolated" and global? What is in between North Korea's actual state of "isolation" and its newfound, virtual globalism – between a power bounded materially by territorial rule and a power enabled by an ICBM's planetary circulation?

I borrow the term "circulation" from the literature on monarchical empire politics. It is said that an empire's expansion is first "set in place" by the release of a new coin. A coin is a visual and tactile "fact" plus words. Its circulation is said to have found a new territory-to-be (de Certeau 1986; Marin 1988). For a space cannot be immediately made legible by the semantics of a new power-regime; it has to be made so by practice involving a token-evidence. The token-evidence, the coin, was a miniature expression of that provisional state of power: consisting of legible letters and visible icons, the coin served as an allegorical figure for the new space whose visibility was yet to be made commensurably legible under the new sign of power. The coin provisionally gave a unified body to the yet-to-be consummated relation between visible "fact" and legible words. And in that lacuna of suspended relating between visibility and legibility, could the "concept" of empire – an otherwise impossible claim to the totality of space – be *inscribed* (Hardt and Negri 2000: xiv).<sup>6</sup>

Parenthetically, it was on account of the relevance of the "totality of space," that I borrowed the ancient Indo-European concept of oath-taking above. For, according to this concept, the calamity vouchsafed to be brought upon the perjurer is said to be of "divine vengeance" in origin (Benveniste 2016: 449). Oath-taking is an act of "tak(ing) the gods to witness" (399). How? According to one expression, it is by "swallow(ing) sulfer" (399), which approximates this act of swearing-by-ordeal to the self-indemnifying weaponry that is the nuclear-head-mounted ICBM. Indeed, apropos "divine vengeance," the arena of the nuclear arms race which North Korea has thus entered is one dominantly organized by a Christian eschatologico-messianic imaginary (Derrida 1984; Derrida 1998).

What is, to return to the above discussion on "circulation," "inscription"? Inscription is a subterfuge ("subreption") whereby the spiritual "surplus" is accessed by means of a deficient fund, such as the object or the body.<sup>7</sup> It is an economy of *incommensurable* relating. An inscriptional technology of power shortcircuits the "touching" (of the coin or the soil) into (a spiritual) "looking," contiguity into continuity. It thereby subsumes spatial heterogeneities under a

---

<sup>6</sup> "The concept of Empire is characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries .... The concept ... posits a regime that effectively encompasses the spatial totality. (As such,) the concept of Empire presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but ... as an order that effectively suspends history ..." (Hardt and Negri 2000: xiv).

<sup>7</sup> This is Immanuel Kant's definition (Spivak 1999: 11-12).

temporal unity (Mondzain 2005: 161). Once the inscriptional conquest is complete, however, the incommensurable relational economy disappears from the hegemon's eyes. The result is "modernism," according to Kiarina Kordela. For modernism, time is the "spiritual" "concept" par excellence, while space is but "inertness without integral dynamic" (Wilhelm Hegel and György Lukács cited in Kordela 2018: 97. 101). As such, the former is *written* – rather than inscribed – on the latter as "historical process" (Ibid.). The same "modernist" regime of writing was in service in the colonization process, as writing "faithfully transmit(ted) the origin (European interiority)" to the outposts of "conquered space" (de Certeau 1988: 216). Thus, writing enabled an "exten(sion) without chang(e)," as it extended over and preserved representations concerning heterogeneous spaces within a homogeneous temporal framework (Ibid.).

To ask, then, what anthropology can say about the sort of political power an ICBM inscribes is also to ask about anthropology's own writing – what kind of an inscriptional technology of power is it? It is to ask about the space-time of anthropology's writing – "space-time" in the sense of the term that we would use when speaking of a missile. If its genealogy pertains to colonialism, as the convention has it, we should consider colonialism not as an always-already legible semantics of political meaning as the hegemon has it, but as a "pragmatics" of space-time inscription (see de Certeau 1986). Such a take on colonialism takes us to a much earlier time than the 18th- and 19th-century political context: it takes us to a time when the virtual conditions for colonial expansion were first "set in place." This was a time when the imaginary of an ecumenical scope of power over the totality of space was first installed by Christianity. The ICBM impels us to expand the horizon of colonialism to such an onto-theological dimension.

Seen thus as a space-time practice, anthropology's "traveling" writing (Tsing 2005: Ch. 6), I will show, comes into view as an heir to evangelical Christianity's mobile writing (of the Book) – which in turn was premised on the ecumenical imaginary of spatial totality without bounds. This lineage is especially pertinent to the anthropology of Asia in general and that of East Asia in particular, that is, of lettered "civilizations" with writing systems of their own. The state of being lettered was pertinent because evangelism deemed the Other's writing system idolatrous, one of whose characteristics was immobility (Grosrichard 1998). For time is believed to become trapped in the idol (more below). The evangelizing writing moved because the Other's was thought to be immobile. In this figuration, contemporary reactions to North Korea's writings had long been anticipated.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> The scope of space-time and historical depth aroused by the space-time of the ICBM limits the present paper to broad strokes in exchange for the discussion of specific works on either North Korea or East Asia.

## **The Space-Time of “Propaganda”**

One may take issue with the present title, “The writing of North Korea’s ICBM” along the following lines: the “writing” called *Juche* to which you refer is the very propaganda which keeps the nation the “most isolated country in the world”; how can you speak of such an insulating instrument in the same breath with a technoscientific device with an inter-continental reach? The holder of such skepticism would have, in fact, stated the simple question this paper is indeed asking: How can a nation be isolated and globally extended at once?<sup>9</sup> And also a related question: what is the relationship between political ideology and technoscientific know-how? To answer, we must begin with an unusual effect that North Korea’s ICBM has had on the world’s perception of space-time.

Aside from “isolation,” there has long existed another refrain which until recently was applied obligatorily to North Korea: “imminent collapse,” referring to the regime’s future fate. The two refrains, one spatial and the other temporal, had been ubiquitous at least since the fall of the Soviet Union. The ICBM changed all that. The two refrains were decoupled from one another and were dealt different fates: “Isolation” survived, but not “imminent collapse.” Virtually all derisive comments on the nation’s futurity ceased when North Korea’s ICBM-related tests started bearing fruit in 2016.<sup>10</sup> Notably, no prior success with any other type of long-range missile had had this effect (see footnote 1). What is it about an ICBM’s range of *spatial* mobility that leads it to alter our *temporal* imaginary?

This abrupt shift in discourse has retrospectively revealed the astonishing postulate in which North Korea had been held: space (“isolation”) as a measure of time (“imminent collapse”). This postulate’s absurdity is made apparent when we apply it to ourselves: no modern person would think of one’s own future limited by a spatial limitation. For the moderns, future is contingently open. This absolute sense of temporal freedom unencumbered by space owes its existence to the history of power’s inscription – named “hegemony”<sup>11</sup> – where all (visible) spaces are deemed legible under a unified temporal regime. Even if momentarily,

---

<sup>9</sup> I have called “isolation” a spatial category for the following reasons. The most frequently cited reasons for this choice of descriptor are: North Korean citizens’ lack of access to exogenous information, e.g., via the Internet or foreign journalism, and their lack of freedom to travel abroad. As I will discuss below, such an image of restricted information invokes the figure of idolatry from the Christian imaginary. Specifically, the figure of the idol is where time gets trapped in space.

<sup>10</sup> This point was ascertained by searching for the phrase “imminent collapse” in news coverage on North Korea. The final instance appeared in the article “What Happens if North Korea Collapses?” in *The Diplomat* on September 3, 2016. All subsequent instances were to point out the phrase’s outdatedness.

<sup>11</sup> A “hegemony” is constituted when the “nomological principle” of an authority hides its “ontological principle” (see Derrida 1996: 1-5), and passes as a pure power of legibility without any investment in the visible world.

North Korea's acquisition of an ICBM interrupted this post-conquest fiction of space-time *commensurability*.

### **ICBM as Technology and Value**

The change in perception in relation to North Korea's future could not have been simply due to the world's re-evaluation of the nation's overall strength, with the ICBM as its index. If the ICBM were merely an index for something other than itself – e.g., a nation's functional competency – then it could be readily replaced with some other equivalent index, such as a sizeable cache of conventional missiles. But the fact is that an ICBM has accomplished something unprecedented for the nation – an interruption of the world's hegemonic sense of space-time commensurability. One possible explanation for this feat is the device's ability to *simulate* space-time commensurability: it traverses vast distances in a fraction of time, as though folding one into the other. An ICBM's mobility does not easily lend itself to the normative space/time distinction: the distance of its reach is inseparable from the extreme speed (*qua* contracted time) with which it exits and re-enters the Earth's atmosphere (MacKenzie 1990). As such, its flight trajectory cannot be mapped on to spatial coordinates. Its power of propulsion allows it to disregard distance as we commonly know it – that is, point-to-point (according to Euclidean geometry).

But this is half the picture, pertaining only to the facts about the ICBM. What kind of "credence," to return to our discussion of oath-taking above, have these "facts" bestowed on North Korea "words"? It is tempting here to cite the political credit, such as gaining membership to the club of "nuclear-weapon states (NWS). But such status depends on a consensus underwritten by a *community* of sorts. Marx called such a credit of value that of "general equivalence," which equips money or the commodity with universal exchangeability (1990[1976]: 157). If nuclear arsenal purchases a nation NWS status, it is because that arsenal is viewed as equivalent to or exchangeable with other like arsenals. The idea of so-called "nuclear deterrence" relies on such a general-equivalent form of value (see Masco 2014).<sup>12</sup>

A crucial detail is missing in such an approach to the nuclear arsenal: it is a form of weaponry premised on its potential to ensure "total destruction." It is underwritten by an apocalyptic or eschatological horizon; not by "community," but by the threat of every community's dissolution. North Korea interprets the "deterrence" effect (핵억지력) of its ICBM differently in two ways. One, it has nothing to do with the ideal of worldwide "peace" as in the West, but *Juche* or

---

<sup>12</sup> We see this form of value also at work in the oft-expounded conjecture that North Korea's ICBM is only a pirated weapon made of "recycled" missile parts from the arsenals of the former Soviet Union.

independence (자주) (Kim 2012: 13292). Two, true to the weapon's premise of "total destruction," this "independence" is – rather than envisioned as part of a larger "community" – expressed as "one vs. the entire world" (1:세계) (Kim 2000: 2). "One vs. the entire" is *not* a term denoting a "secular" transaction. It is that of gods only, as in "tak(ing) the gods to witness" by the oath (Benveniste 2016: 399). As discussed above, such dealings with the "entire" are possible only through an ordeal. An ordeal such as "swallow(ing) sulfur," which I likened to the self-indemnifying weaponry.

Armed with a nuclear warhead, an ICBM becomes a self-indemnifying weapon (Derrida 1984). To "indemnify" is to compensate someone for harm or loss. The liability of a risky loan is "indemnified" by a lien, for instance. In that context, credit is earned in exchange for the lien, which would compensate the creditor in the case of a loan default. To "self-indemnify," then, is to obtain credit by putting *oneself* up as a lien. It is this paradoxical, circular act, where the risk of a possible loss on the part of the creditor is guaranteed by a possible forfeiture of the borrower's own security, well-being, or life. Put simply, it is to reward oneself with credit earned by the threat of self-harm, or to acquire something symbolic by means of something non-symbolic or "natural." A self-indemnifying weapon threatens others by threatening oneself first. It is, in that sense, the oath-taker's "wand of authority" that kills. Whatever is made legible here is one *inscribed* in the visible body. From this angle, the ICBM's "intercontinental" mobility is an "ability" that is meaningful only in relation to its place of origin, as if inseparably tethered to it.

### **Writing and the Missile**<sup>14</sup>

To ask what anthropology can say about an ICBM is also to ask the same question in reverse – what can an ICBM say about anthropology's writing? This is because the genealogy of anthropology's writing bears the memory of a power's inscription upon the global space. This memory, I suggest, is that of Christianity's evangelizing writing. Let me showcase this relevance of the evangelical imaginary by turning to the most canonized of all anthropological works on writing: that of Jack Goody.

---

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive view on North Korea's nuclear arsenal see (Kim 2009: 20-8).

<sup>14</sup> I owe this association to (Derrida 1984).

For Goody, writing is consubstantial with the rise of the “institution” (1987).<sup>15</sup> Writing ensures temporal continuity – so-called “institutional memory” – which Max Weber identifies as the modern institution’s signature (see Lefort 1991: Ch. 12). For Weber, the institution commands authority without the need for commencement or inscription; its authority is, by nature, hegemonic (my word; see footnote 11). Goody modifies Weber’s thesis, bringing non-modern civilizations into the fold. Whether modern or non-modern, writing, for him, “preserves the not-now spoken,” allowing it to be recalled at a later time (2000: 116). Writing compensates for orality’s ephemerality, as “recitation ... cannot be word for word” (117). This is to say that, for him, there is a one-to-one correlation between the spoken word’s unity and that of writing. Writing’s mnemonic function depends on this correlational fidelity. And this verbal/written commensurability is possible in the first place because the two are assumed to be qualitatively different from one another – much as in the “modernist” space/time relationship, according to Kiarina Kordela (2018). The nature of that qualitative difference comes through especially well in his comments on religious writings. The Scripture, Goody writes, is the “written version of the oral tradition” originating from God’s Word itself: “the written religious canon may trace its origin directly from supernatural sources” (119). The verbal here is qualitatively different from the written, much as the “supernatural” is from the “natural.” Much as, that is, the Creator’s Word or “breath” is different from the world it created (see Santner 2006: Ch. 1). Writing is that which “preserves” such a “breath” of truth – or truth-as-breath – through time.

Goody expands the Weberian thesis to include the non-modern and the non-Western precisely to counter the prestige of the modern and the Western. Specifically, it is to defend the value of “oral culture” against the hegemony of Western writing. “It is a gross ethnocentric error of Europe to attribute too much to the alphabet and too much to the West,” he writes (1987: 56). In the same breath, however, he singles out the alphabet as an entity destined to be the “democratic form of writing” (56). It is democracy-bound because its “limited number of alphabetic signs” makes writing available to the “vast majority of the community.” And this, in turn, is because the alphabet “systematically provides graphemes for vowels as well as for consonants” – the condition for the aforementioned verbal/written correlational fidelity.

Goody places the “logo-syllabic” writing of the Chinese at the opposite end to the alphabet, a system where “signs ... express both words and syllables” (28). Here, a syllable’s grapheme *within* a word could also serve as an independent word by itself. The container/content hierarchy here is *reversible*. The outcome is a lack of correlational fidelity between the verbal and the written or the visible. There is an *excess of visibility* in the written sign which obscures its

---

<sup>15</sup> From this position, he criticizes expansive definitions of writing, which include, for instance, the reading of stars (2000: 113).

link to the verbal breath-as-truth. It, as it were, visually “traps” the temporal continuity between the verbal and the written. Recall that the alphabet’s characteristic temporal continuity is due to a commensurable balance between the visible and the audible. If so, strictly speaking, the visually-excessive Chinese writing falls outside Goody’s institution-centered definition of writing. Incidentally, the Korean writing system – named *hangul* in the South and *chosŏn’gŭl* in the North – is *not* “logo-syllabic” strictly speaking; it is phonetic, like the alphabet. But, like the Chinese “character,” a written Korean sign is a stacked-up “bloc” of multiple syllabic graphemes. Here, also, in the eyes of the uninitiated, the visible overshadows the audible.

Its filiation to the “breath” of truth and meaning obscured, non-alphabetic writing in Goody’s typology, I argue, calls back the age-old Christian figure of the *idol*. What is the idol? According to Marie-José Mondzain, the idol in Christian theology is “both an image of falsehood and the false image of the truth” (2005: 180). Both the container and the content, it is a “double” that “traps” life’s impetus towards continuity and all promises of resurrection, incarnation, and salvation (180). It traps movement too – it “isolates.” The idolaters are those who are immobile in their temples and worship the signs made holy in and by the temple. More than pagans, however, this bill fits that ultimate inner Other of the Christian – the Jew. The Jews are, by reason of their “immobility,” “a people of the book and the letter”; “They are people of the sign, always at a remove from meaning” (211). And, like their obscure, “trapping” signs, she continues, the Jew’s body is one that is completely “circumscribed” by the sharp “lines” of its famously-nosed profile. It is a visual excess. This, in contrast to “Christ’s uncircumscribable body (which) promises the transfiguration (towards) life” (212). We find this holy body in Goody’s alphabet, a set of signs whose written visibility only circumscribes the absent, invisible “breath” of meaning.

### **Writing and Space**

Writing is made up of graphic images. But the graphic image hides, in its iconic body, the “inward convention” of meaning (Benjamin 1998: 55). This is to say that, if writing mediates between the visible and the legible, it does so as an inscription – which is to say, incommensurably. To what extent has anthropology retained this lesson in the reflection on its own writing practice?

Anthropology’s writing was inaugurated predominantly as a means of capturing the “not-written” (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 18, 25) or, as in Goody, “oral culture.” A division of labor of sorts was thus introduced: writing’s internal (inscriptional) incommensurables were externalized – as the difference between anthropology’s writing and its object. This division of labor was further reinforced

as it was personified in the informant/anthropologist division; both deemed phenomenological subjects whose bodies cohere vision and hearing commensurably-in-separation (see Bergson 1990: Ch. 1). To that extent, anthropology failed to see its own writing as a case of iconic expression,<sup>16</sup> as spatial or bodily inscription. To that extent, also, anthropology never seriously questioned the historical reasons for its own writing's famous mobility; it enjoyed such a history as a hegemonic state. This is crucial to understanding the anthropology of Asia in general and that of East Asia in particular – that is to say, the anthropology of “civilizations” and “empires,” with their own writing systems and literary cultures, and with their own aspirations toward global power and towards narrating the world. I will now show that the encounter between anthropology's own writing and that of the Other has been conditioned by the long history of Christianity's war with its own idolatrous self. An heir to this legacy, the image anthropology holds of its own writing is one self-immunized from the threat of idolatry.

Narrating this story, however, cannot but be labored for the following reason. Christianity's iconoclasm controversy began as early as the 8th or 9th century (Mondzain 2005). The birth of anthropology is typically traced to 17th- and 18th-century Europe (Stocking 1968; Zammuto 2002). Narrating the connection between the two necessitates a sweeping historicization in a condensed space, for which I beg the reader's indulgence.

The birth of anthropology was simultaneous with the crisis in so-called “European consciousness” (Schmitt 2003; Monateri 2018). One of the responses to this crisis in the lettered community was the “science of writing” (Derrida 1997[1974]: 79-80), accompanied by a fascination with Other writing system (see the epigraph). On the political front, this period saw the dissolution of the “European equilibrium” (Schmitt 2003) and a growing obsession with “Asian despotism” (Grosrichard 1998). Europe's crisis within thus turned the distant Other into its own project for self-redemption.<sup>17</sup> Here, I mean “redemption” in the full Christian theological sense. For what was “broken up” politically (after the Thirty Years' War) was the unity of Christendom into the plurality of rival proto-nation-state Christian kingdoms. And fractured along with that was the ideal of a unified humanity to be redeemed. Concurrently, as a part of this Other-directed theological project, anthropology's self-identity as “traveling knowledge,” and ethnography as mobile writing, were forged.

---

<sup>16</sup> “Icons,” writes the anthropologist Nancy Munn, “exhibit something other than themselves *in* themselves (1986: 75; original emphasis). Iconic expression is at work when “one element finds the form of its own value *in* the shape of another” (297; emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> The Other empires were viewed as “decreed by Providence whose will it was both to punish Christians for their divisions and to give them the opportunity to redeem themselves” (Grosrichard 1998: 21).

The above account on the birth of anthropology is more or less canonical (see Stocking 1968, Zamitto 2002). Here is where I depart: The Other which became Europe's self-assigned "project" was not limited to other cultures, other civilizations, or other empires. On the literary front – which is essential to the topic of writing – it encompassed the entire world of Nature (Benjamin 1998). Other humans were its continuations. Deafness, as in Leibniz's "Chinese writing," or silence, were oft-invoked aesthetic figure uniting the natural world with Other humans. "The fallen nature mourns," and so is mute (Benjamin 1998: 224). Redemption at this time was a project to restore "breath" to the silent visible world, for which the "science of writing" was to play the central role. And this redemption was not a historically specific, "secularist" project.<sup>18</sup> In foregrounding "writing" (and this is my central argument) it resurrected the original Christian ecumenical imaginary, circumscribing Nature along with all peoples, cultures, and languages.

Specifically, this history pertained to the controversy over idolatry, for whose elaboration I rely heavily on Marie-José Mondzain's seminal work (2005). First, what is the theology of redemption, and why does it concern the "icon"? After the Fall, the entire visible world and its images became afflicted with ephemerality. Why? Due to their having been cut off from time's Providential unfolding towards Fulfillment. Visible things became nothing but brute visibility, having been dispossessed of the meaning-to-come which is *invisible* within the present field of the visible. What used to be "writing" – imbued with a legible meaning-to-come – became but a husk of visible signs adrift from all meaningfulness. Such de-temporalized visible things are deemed by necessity idolatrous, in the custody of the Devil. To redeem them was to "take (them) back" by means of a regime of temporalizing icons (Mondzain 2005: 59). The goal was to restore the time of "unfolding" to visible things – or, more precisely, to restore the time which inscribes itself in space and on the body.

### **Asia, the Devil**

According to Mondzain, idolatry became the central idiom with which power struggles between rivaling Christian empires – between the imperial political power of the emperor and the ecclesiastical power of the church – were waged. The struggle was over which temporal power would get to claim direct continuity with divine power. This struggle was waged over visibility and the image. And the reason was not just because of the theology of the Fall. Among the human senses, vision alone was seen to have the "capacity to strike as a lightning bolt," and without allowing "contradictions" (152). As such, when put in the service of power, vision "proposes a definition of the *entirety of space* where power is

---

<sup>18</sup> Secularity, for Benjamin, is the time when "space (has) transformed into the strictly present" (1998: 194)

deployed" (152; emphasis added). Vision is the sense *par excellence* for empire. This should remind us of the power struggle over ICBMs. The ICBM was sought for its "lightning bolt" speed, towards the goal of transcending spatial limitations altogether. Similarly, sought after among the rivaling Christian empires was a "folding" of space with time in order to make the resistance of space appear to disappear altogether. But to what end? To be the one and only divine power incarnate of a terrestrial empire – that is, to be equal to the *concept* of empire (see footnote 6).

Likewise, power's trouble with space was the backdrop to the crisis of "European Consciousness" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That was precisely when the struggle over the one and only terrestrial Christendom was finally and officially given up (the "Peace of Westphalia," 1648) (Monateri 2018; Schmitt 2003). Terrestrial space was broken up and "relativized" into political territories with borders. Once again, as mentioned already, the project to redeem this "crisis" turned towards vision. It was the same vision which, ever since the first project of redemption, appeared to transcend spatial limitations. Redemption through vision became the literary and aesthetic response to a crisis made irresolvable in politics. Nature became the "book of nature," "every image ... a form of writing," imbued with an "inward convention of word and script" (Benjamin 1998: 55). It was a technique for rehabilitating mere image into icon. Once again, the goal was to overcome now-relativized space. It was to overcome space made heterogeneous in order to bring it into the fold of a homogeneous time.

Thus "writing," however broadly conceived, was centrally at issue at the time of anthropology's birth. It was nothing less than *the* technology of redemption. Writing converted mere image into two-faced icon (see footnote 16). For, as has been mentioned, it is a graphic image that hides the "inward convention" of meaning within. Thus, writing mediated the visible world with invisibility, the terrestrial with the divine, or space with time. It was trusted to do so in the eighth century as well as in the seventeenth. Then what is one to do with the Other writing, seemingly with its own "inward convention of word and script"? It was a threat of cosmic proportions. The Other writing system was associated with the Other empire, which relativized the totalizing spatial ambition of any would-be one and only empire – even if that ambition was one salvaged in the literary and aesthetic imagination.

Idolatry was the battle-cry ready at hand, earlier practiced against the intra-Christian Other. The idol is an empty husk of a sign. Empty, it is mute, deaf to the "breath" of God's Word. Idolatrous, excessive visibility is the mark of the Other's writing, a sure sign that it is in the custody of the Devil. What is the Devil? The Devil's profession is that of generating false values, be it with a counterfeit coin or a sham church without a congregation. It is a *rival empire* – equipped with its own currency, script, law, church, etc. (Foucault 2014: 151-2). A Devil

incarnate every time, the Other rival territorial empire was, first and foremost, the shadowy inner-double of the self's own imperial ambition. The Other empire inspired an inner-Christian.

The foregoing is crucial in historicizing anthropology and in understanding the anthropology of (East) Asia. Why? Firstly, because this inner Christian Other anticipated the colonial Other. Secondly, because this theologically-informed figure of the Other prepared a special, damned place for subsequently-encountered Other empires – with their own scripts, coins, etc. Thirdly, because this “place” is an inner place, an *intimate* place. But this inner place is more than that of a psychological alter-ego: it is locatable at the “fold” of space and time, or the terrestrial and the heavenly. Thus, to state how the inner Christian Other anticipated the colonial Other is also to make a *geo-political* statement. These points are crucial for historicizing anthropology because they revise the colonialism-centered history of the discipline. The colonialism-centered view of anthropology privileged the cultures of the “not written.” Rivaling empires and Other writing-systems were never significant analytical categories for anthropology. If anything, anthropology with a colonialism-centered view of itself assumed a moral license to bedamn societies with their own imperial ambitions and their own zealotry to colonize and narrate the world. This moral license echoes the old battle-cry of idolatry and the desire of the would-be last-standing terrestrial empire.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Iconoclasm of *Writing Culture***

The insurrectionary collection *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, ed. 1986) squarely put writing at the focal point of the critique. But it was a lost opportunity for a genealogical or historical investigation, as the question about writing was reduced to representational strategies. As Marilyn Strathern notes, the collection's scathing critique of what it called “representationalism” only ended with a “suppression” of any representation (2004: 19; emphasis added). The co-editor James Clifford's recommendation of the Surrealist fragmented style of writing for ethnography makes her privileged case, to which we will return.

In such a gesture of “suppression,” according to Mondzain, the Christian legacy of iconoclasm lives on in the modern world. On a modernist art movement, of which Clifford's inspiration is a part, she writes: the modern-day iconoclasts

---

<sup>19</sup> Rivaling empires and rivaling colonizers complicate the “geography” of anthropology's moral imperatives. For moral imperatives are drawn with particular spatiotemporal imaginary, where the colonial history is *spatialized* – a movement away from Europe. Bring the Devil into the mix and this spatialized imagination becomes significantly complicated. Spatialization of history or time is the prerogative of those who fancy themselves liberated from the inner-empire of the Devil – the “secularists.”

sacralize mourning .... They produce both works and discourse about melancholia ... privileging the emblems of lack and yawning gap in the name of an irreparable absence. ... Denouncing all idolatrous ceremonials, they do not harbor iconic dreams and iconophile ambitions. (2005: 186)

No more “ambitions,” because the world that is concerned here is a post-evangelical hegemony: evangelizing has been completed. Instead, the modern-day iconoclast saves “ambition” by other means, Mondzain seems to be saying: by “sacralizing mourning,” by commemorating melancholia. Sigmund Freud’s other name for melancholia is “preemptive mourning.” For Freud, if mourning involves the actual loss of a love-object, preemptive mourning effects the “return of the object-cathexis” (1953: 252). One “stage(s) a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost” (Agamben 1993: 20). In the image-saturated modern world, representation cannot be “lost”; it is only cheapened, mass-produced/consumed, and its life-span an ephemeral “trap.”<sup>20</sup> What does one do? One “saves” it by precisely giving a “stage” to the ephemeral, quickly-disposed life of facile representations. Rather than attempt to create an exceptional, lasting representation, one, as it were, becomes an owner of this “theater” of changeability. Clifford’s writing, he professes, is motivated by “this century,” which “fragments” him. Elsewhere, he describes this experience as “feeling historical” (2012). The passage of time or history itself makes him feel “historical,” fragmented. What is he to do? He writes fragmented texts, he upstages ephemeral representations. He calls it “realism” (2013: 27-29). What is iconoclasm if not such a self-immunizing therapeutics of “surviving” the ephemeral idols precisely by spotting them everywhere and parading them ceaselessly in front of oneself?

At the time of *Writing Culture*, the Boasian imperative of self-discovery through movement to faraway places has gained a new urgency: “home” is a space where one “feels historical,” being surpassed by the passage of time itself. One has to move in order not to become obsolete – idolatrous. By one’s own movement, the anthropologist produces a moving theater of ephemeral, idolatrous things. Strathern compares this urgent movement behind the *Writing Culture* imaginary to that of the “cosmopolitan”:

More than other travelers, cosmopolitans remain so after return home. ... (Their) present positions are composites derived from a heterogeneous

---

<sup>20</sup> So-called “communist chic” in art and fashion offers a good example of such a post-representational and post-(political) ideology aesthetics of ironic distance in the “post-socialist” world (see Frank, ed. 2011). In fact, North Korea’s state art is currently one of the biggest suppliers of communist chic to the global market-place (Foster-Carter and Hext 2011). What paradoxically binds global taste and the regime’s interests together, I suggest, is fear of the idol’s “trap” – of obsolescence, of “regime change,” etc. In my manuscript-in-preparation “Untimely North Korea,” I argue that, for this reason, this state’s temporal politics is no longer one of naive utopian progressivism, but always-already “retrofuturistic,” an offshoot of communist chic.

worldwide constellation of others. ... A collage (the technique of Clifford's choice) inhabited. ... (For the cosmopolitan,) home is a place where anthropologists never imagined it was possible for the fieldworker to act as "one person." (2004: 21)

Only in movement does one stay as "one person." This project of self-redemption through globe-trekking requires unlimited space, an "ecumenical" space, that is equal to time itself. Otherwise, one would be surpassed by the latter, as Clifford fears. Such a space is available only to the last-standing, terrestrial empire, the only heir to the divine mandate.

In the resulting moving theater of ephemeral things named anthropology, it is only fitting that the Other's representation is oral. It cannot be writing, let alone writing with a mobility of its own. For writing – to return to the beginning of this paper – straddles the "subjective" and the "objective," the legible and the visible, iconically expressing and making a claim to actual space. If true, the foregoing encourages us to re-examine the much-celebrated cover photo of *Writing Culture*. In it, the "native informant" is spectating from behind the anthropologist Stephen Tyler, the latter engrossed in the act of writing. The informant appears serenely bemused. Bemused, one conjectures, because he does not write himself – he does not entertain such an ambition. *Writing Culture's* staging of the "observers observed" (Stocking 1985), the so-called "self-reflexivity," stops there. It cannot be the "writer written." For an *anthropology* of Asia or East Asia to abide by writing is also to acknowledge rival empires and competing ambitions of global domination. Whether what survives that abiding will remain "anthropology" remains to be seen.

### **The Writer Written**

In order to abide by North Korea's writing, let me return to *Rodong sinmun* to offer a counter-image to *Writing Culture's* cover photo. My attention to the leader's writing there would have been strange to those habituated to the idiom of the "personality cult." If the "person" of the leader is all that matters, as the idiom has it, would not the image of the leader alone (along with that of the missile) suffice here? And the "recovery" I mentioned would be nothing but a plain revisionism of temporal sequence to make the leader *the* cause of anything positive, would it not? Here, I must remind the skeptic of the aforementioned "gap" (between the first and the second image). As already noted, there is no natural flow between the two. The gap would stall any revisionist attempt at smooth temporal progression. We may venture a hypothesis: what if the point of the "recovery" is to *show* this gap? The gap, that is, between the body we see in the act of writing and the written which the writer himself presumably perceived.

I hypothesize that in this gap between the “objective” and the “subjective” subsists what one might call, the “voice” of the leader’s authority. And this voice, unlike Goody’s “oral,” rises in-between hearing and vision; Kim Jung-un’s signature culminates it when he writes his own audible name. As such, this “voice” is not something one listens to but, ideally, something one responds to by one’s own act of writing. Examples of this prescribed response abound in the scenes of the so-called “on-site guidance” (현지지도)<sup>21</sup> by the leader ((Ryang 2012: 45): those in attendance, more often than not, are portrayed in the North Korean media not as listeners, but as scribes themselves, furiously noting down the “guidance.” What is the difference? The listener is one whose listening body we see “objectively,” but whose “subjective” listening experience is unavailable. This disconnect is ambiguous in the one who listens-writes: we observe the imagined “subjective” in the process of becoming “objective.” The prescribed ideal leader-people relationship is one of writer-to-writer. Towards what end? Anthropology’s writing may commence there, with this question.

## **References**

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1998. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London and New York: Verso.
- Bergson, Henri. 1990. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer. London and New York: Zone Books.
- Clifford, James. 2012. “Feeling Historical.” *Cultural Anthropology* 27(3): 417-26.
- Clifford, James and George Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: Poetics and Politics of Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1986. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1988. *The Writing of History*. Trans. Tom Conley. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1984. “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives).” *Diacritics*, 14(2): 20-31.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>21</sup> Its previous name was “현지지도,” which was changed to “현지지도” in 1990 as Kim Jong-il made the practice his signature style (*Rodong sinmun* January 7, 1990).

\_\_\_\_\_. 1997[1974]. *Of Grammatology (corrected edition)*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." In *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1-78.

Foster-Carter, Aidan and Kate Hext. 2011. "DPRKrazy, Sexy, Cool: The Art of Engaging North Korea." In *Exploring North Korean Arts*, Frank Rüdiger, ed. MAK Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 31-50.

Foucault, Michel. 2014. *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Freud, Sigmund. 1953. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 243-58. Trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press.

Goody, Jack. 1987. *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *The Power of the Written Tradition*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution.

Grosrichard, Alain. 1998. *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*. Trans. Liz Heron. London and New York: Verso.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Kim, Chul-woo. 2000. *김정일 장군의 선군정치*. 평양: 평양출판사.

Kim, Jin-hwa. 2009. *북핵일지: 1955-2009*. 통일연구원.

Kim, Kwang-su. 2008. *세습은 없다: 주체의 후계자론과의 대화*. 서울: 선인.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2012. *사상국가: 북한의 선군사상*. 서울: 선인.

Kim, Nam-shik. 2004. "선군정치란 무엇인가." *통일뉴스*, December 30.

Kordela, A. Kiarina. 2018. *Epistemontology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan: The (Bio)power of Structure*. New York: Routledge.

*Korea Today*. 2003. "Army-centered Politics of Peace and Security," 1: 6; "Building the Banner of Army-centered Policy," 2: 4; "Army-centered Era," 3:2; "Army-centered Politics Come of Victory," 4: 12. Pyongyang: The Foreign Language Magazines.

- Lefort, Claude. 1991. *Democracy and Political Theory*. Trans. David Macey. Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1967. *Structural Anthropology, Vol. I*. Trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Doubleday.
- Mackenzie, Donald. 1990. *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
- Marin, Louis, 1988. *Portrait of the King*. Trans. Martha M. Houle. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1990[1976]. *Capital, Volume I*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. Penguin Classics.
- Masco, Joseph. 2014. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Monateri, Pier Giuseppe. 2018. *Dominus Mundi: Political Sublime and the World Order*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- Mondzain, Marie-José. 2005. *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of Contemporary Imaginary*. Trans. Rico Franses. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Munn, Nancy D. 1986. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Rüdiger, Frank, ed. 2011. *Exploring North Korean Arts*. MAK Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg.
- Ryang, Sonia. 2012. *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Santner, Eric L. 2006. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Schmitt, Carl. 2003. *The Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Candor: Telos Press Publishing.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Stocking, George, Jr. 1968. *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*. New York and London: The Free Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1985. *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

- Strathern, Marilyn. 2004. *Partial Connections*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Zammito, John. 2002. *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.