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Turning Marx on His Head? North Korean Juche as Developmental Nationalism

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ABSTRACT
The existing literature on North Korea has been divided over whether the country’s state ideology of Juche should be regarded as a variant of Soviet Marxism-Leninism or whether the explicit voluntarism of Juche means that it should be viewed as a distinctive indigenous ideology. Drawing on Trotsky’s theory of uneven and combined development and Gramsci’s theory of ideology, the paper argues that North Korea’s status as a geopolitically insecure postcolonial country engaged in a forced march from “backwardness” to a modern industrialized economy has had a decisive impact on both the form and content of North Korean state ideology. Understood as a form of developmental nationalism that seeks not only to legitimize authoritarian rule but also to create a collective subjectivity suited the task of rapid catch-up national development, Juche constitutes a combined ideological form that rests on Marxist-Leninist origins but has deliberately drawn on existing forms of “common sense” conducive towards the mass mobilization of society. In doing so, this paper critically engages with the argument that the voluntarism of Juche represents a decisive break from the supposedly objective laws of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism, thereby “turning Marx on his head.”

KEYWORDS
North Korea; Juche; Ideology; Gramsci; Uneven and Combined Development

Introduction
North Korea’s apparent failure to pursue a path of economic opening and reform despite the manifest successes of its Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts has long posed a puzzle to observers of the country. The North Korean government’s isolationist stance and resistance to greater integration into the global economy has frequently been explained with reference to its state ideology of Juche. While the term’s literal translation is “subject,” Juche is typically understood by observers as a commitment to autonomy and self-reliance, and above all minimal dependency on the outside world. Nonetheless, there has been a distinct lack of agreement among scholars on whether Juche should be understood as a variant of orthodox Marxism-Leninism or as a distinctively indigenous ideology. Central to this question has been the significance of Juche’s explicit
voluntarism, i.e., its emphasis on the extent to which consciousness and the human will are the primary drivers of history over structural economic factors.

Scholars have drawn attention, for example, to the fact that voluntaristic Juche slogans such as “man is the master of his own destiny” are a significant departure from the supposedly objective laws of Marxism-Leninism. Rudiger Frank has argued that Juche marks a return to Hegel by implying that there are no objective laws of societal development and that anything could be done if one wished, arguing, “Engels was so proud that Marx had, as he said, put Hegel’s philosophy from standing on its head back upon its feet. Kim Il-sung put it back.” North Korean political discourse is indeed explicit about this voluntaristic shift. From this perspective, Marxism “instructs to understand and approach the world as it is, in other words, to behave according to the law of the change and development of the objective material world.” However, it does not “… directly show the road of shaping man’s destiny. It is the man-centred world outlook [of Juche] that shows the road of shaping man’s destiny directly and scientifically.”

Yet this begs the question of why exactly North Korean state ideology came to possess such strongly voluntaristic strains. Though the North Korean state presents Juche as the unique theoretical contributions of founding leader Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il, some analysts have argued that voluntarist strains of Juche have their roots in Korea’s pre- and early-modern political culture. Bruce Cumings notes, for example, that “… North Korea has turned Marx on his head (or Hegel back on his feet) by arguing that “ideas determine everything, a formulation Taewŏn’gun’s neo-Confucian scribes would have liked.” Charles Armstrong similarly observes that “Korean communists tended to turn Marx on his head, as it were, valorizing human will over socio-economic structures in a manner more reminiscent of traditional Confucianism than classic Marxism-Leninism.” Sergei Kurbanov also argues that “North Korea’s Juche is not simply a ‘Koreanized’ form of communist ideology. Quite to the contrary: it is a system of ideas which has absorbed many traditional indigenous ideological components.”

This view of Juche as a distinctly indigenous ideology has been challenged, however. Thomas Stock has argued that, for reasons of political expediency, the North Korean state has exaggerated Juche’s claim to originality. According to Stock, Juche possesses a strong materialist underpinning and a worldview virtually identical to that of Marxism-Leninism. Furthermore, key elements of Juche such as consciousness, ideology, and wilful action, which are often contrasted by scholars with objective economic laws, have played a crucial role in the Marxist-Leninist tradition throughout its evolution. While this latter insight is important and will be explored further below, Stock’s main aim is to subsume Juche into Marxism-Leninism and deny North Korean claims to ideological originality and departure from the Marxist-Leninist tradition. Extending this analysis to

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1Frank 2015, 797.  
3Cumings 2012, 218. Hŭngsŏng Taewŏn’gun (“prince of the great court”) was the father of and regent for King Kojong between 1864 and 1873. He carried out a set of conservative reforms from above in the 1860s in the context of increasing foreign encroachment.  
4Armstrong 2003, 4.  
5Kurbanov 2019, 301.  
6Stock 2020, 225.  
7Stock 2020, 232.
the Kim Jong Un era (2011–), Joe Pateman argues that *Juche* and its more recent formulation as “Kimilsungism” and “Kimjongilism” has inherited key principles from Marxism-Leninism, such as working-class emancipation, class analysis, proletarian revolution, and the scientific basis of socialism. In addition, *Juche* is founded on Marxist-Leninist principles of socialism in one country, socialist democracy, democratic centralism, economic planning, and the construction of communism.8

While this critique provides an important corrective to those who argue that *Juche* is a decisive break with Marxism-Leninism or has more in common with traditional Korean modes of thought, both sides of the debate tend to treat ideologies as ideal types that are abstracted from their material underpinnings, leading to formalistic comparisons and a dichotomous framing around whether *Juche* is endogenous or exogenous in its origins. However, juxtaposing Marxism-Leninism and *Juche* in this manner underplays the extent to which Marxism-Leninism itself was a state ideology that served to establish political rule amidst projects of state building and catch-up industrialization, and in doing so, emphasized the role of human agency over structural factors. Under such circumstances, state ideologies can be understood as complex amalgamations of multiple and often disparate influences that emerge out of inter-societal interactions and mutual conditioning. At the same time, a consideration of this broader context of late development helps to shed light on why North Korean state ideology, in particular, came to possess such strongly voluntaristic strains.

Drawing on Leon Trotsky’s law of uneven and combined development and Antonio Gramsci’s theory of ideology, I argue that *Juche* should be understood as a combined ideological underpinning of North Korea’s project of post-colonial late development. In this respect, *Juche* is a particular instantiation of a broader trend in late developing countries whereby state ideologies emerge as a response to conditions of self-perceived “backwardness” through the mobilization of material and ideational resources towards the collective goal of catch-up industrialization. In drawing upon existing culturally specific ideological forms, or what Gramsci referred to as “common sense,” *Juche* constitutes a particular instantiation of what Radhika Desai refers to as “developmental nationalism.”9 Furthermore, claims that the strongly voluntarist themes of *Juche* “turn Marx on his head” area mischaracterization of Marxist-Leninist state ideology. The imperative of late development and the need for a legitimizing worldview have more widely exaggerated the voluntaristic elements of state ideology, in a manner that is true for *Juche*, Marxism-Leninism, and developmental nationalisms more broadly.

**North Korea’s uneven and combined development**

The puzzle of North Korean voluntarism can be explained with reference to how *Juche* is situated within what Trotsky referred to as the “law” of uneven and combined development. In his historical analysis of the causes of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky understood development as being uneven and combined rather than a linear staged process. Russia, he argued, had not simply repeated the development of advanced countries but instead adapted the latter’s latest achievements into its own

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8Pateman 2021, 368.
9Desai 2008.
The implications of this unevenness were that backward countries did not need to go through the same stages of development experienced by earlier industrializers in the same order. The privilege of historic backwardness meant that aspiring developing countries could, under the right conditions, skip intermediate developmental stages, leading to peculiar combinations of different stages in the historical process. The experience of late development, Trotsky argued, cannot be understood with reference solely to a developing country’s internal attributes but must also take account of the prior existence of the already-developed countries. This inherent unevenness of development “... reveals itself more sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps.” This inherent unevenness of development thereby leads not to convergence but to unique combined forms. In the case of Russia, for example, incorporation into capitalist modernity had led to a specific social formation whereby the existing peasant economy was maintained alongside the creation of advanced centers of industry.

Trotsky’s insights have more recently formed the basis for a burgeoning literature on uneven and combined development in historical sociology and international relations. This literature draws attention to how “… forms and patterns of combination are conditioned by and rooted within the overall unevenness of human development.” This reflects the simple fact that no society exists in isolation. By extension, the conditions of reproduction which define the concrete existence of any given society are not limited to the internal structures of social relations but always include, by virtue of the bare fact of inter-societal coexistence, those external conditions which are the object of diplomatic management. One key implication of this unevenness and the resulting lateness of development in world-historical time is a contrast in the kinds of institutions that underpin the catch-up developmental process. As Steven Rolf argues:

... catch up development is inherently political. Since it by definition cannot be organised at the initiative of a single or collective capitalist’s short-term interests, catching up requires the intervention of the state in order to construct a socialized territorial assemblage able to compete with more advanced productive forces.

However, the extraordinary popular mobilization and sacrifices demanded by catch-up industrialization raise the question of ideology. In the case of late-developing and post-colonial countries, this ideological dimension of uneven and combined development is a crucial if underexplored site of analysis. As Alexander Gerschenkron argues,

It should be noted that the term “backwardness” has been criticized for its Eurocentrism. Gurminder Bhambra has argued that, despite uneven and combined development’s explicit critique of linear development theory, the approach views successive stages of development as morally progressive in character (Bhambra 2011, 675). Felipe Antunes de Oliveira sees “backwardness” as part of Trotsky’s outdated vocabulary that should be discarded in order to tackle Eurocentrism (in Rosenberg et al. 2022, 31). However, the term was not used by Trotsky to denote cultural regression or inferiority but rather, according to Justin Rosenberg, “the chronological fact of beginning or arriving later than the earlier participants in a shared historical process ... and this chronological unevenness also produced an imbalance of power and a consequent desire on the weaker side to reduce the gap through emulation and ‘development’... if we jettison the terms ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’ altogether, do we not also censor the self-expression of those trapped in this experience?” (Rosenberg 2020, 282). Indeed, as we shall see below, Kim Il Sung’s writings and speeches repeatedly refer to the need to overcome Korea’s “backwardness.”

Trotsky 1997, 26-27.
Trotsky 1997, 27.
Anievas and Matin 2016, 9.
Rolf 2015, 139.
“in a backward country the great and sudden industrialization effort calls for a New Deal in emotions.”\(^\text{16}\) This involves the mobilization of developmental nationalism, which typically emerges out of anti-imperialist struggles.\(^\text{17}\) In reality, rapid catch-up industrialization brings social dislocations caused by the movement of people from rural to urban areas, the undermining of existing values, and the disturbance of vested interests. Nationalism maintains social cohesion and justifies the self-sacrifice, forced high savings rates, and deferral of consumption that accompanies industrialization.\(^\text{18}\) In this respect, developmental nationalism can be understood as a response to the whip of external necessity and a means to mobilize a society to overcome its own alleged backwardness. By extension, the challenges of state building and catch-up industrialization impart a particularly voluntaristic strain to developmental nationalisms. Indeed, catch-up industrialization is seen as too urgent a goal to be left to supposedly linear stages of development but instead requires both active interventions from above and the mobilization of society as part of the forced march to modernity.

The precise form that developmental nationalism takes varies. In much of the post-colonial world, a Marxist-Leninist emphasis on the development of the productive forces formed its basis. After the First World War, socialism became the main ideological arm for the forced march of a whole range of underdeveloped countries. It was fused effectively with their new nationalisms rather than with the class-consciousness of workers in developed countries.\(^\text{19}\) Indeed, one of the ironies of the twentieth-century experience was that nationalism’s principal opponent, Marxism, was both empowered by its alliances with nationalism and responsible for creating the conditions for late development.\(^\text{20}\) Yet, the scope of developmental nationalism is obviously not limited to Marxism-Leninism. One only need to look across the 38th parallel to Park Chung-Hee’s “can do spirit” (hamyŏn toenda) to note that voluntaristic appeals to human agency in the context of late development are by no means the preserve of state socialist countries, even if there has been less imperative for elaborate ideological justification in the non-socialist world.

What then were the conditions of uneven and combined development that led to the emergence of North Korean Juche? As elsewhere in Asia, the origins of North Korea’s imperative towards catch-up industrialization can be traced to Europe’s imperialist expansion in Asia during the nineteenth century. The 1868 Meiji Restoration in Japan and its slogan of “rich country, powerful army” (fukoku kyōhei) provided an ideational basis for national responses in Asia to the external challenges posed Western imperialism. The rise of Japan as a militarist and imperialist power was also crucial to the formation of modern developmental nationalisms within the region, with Korea being no exception. Three and a half decades of Japanese colonial rule thoroughly transformed the country and was central in nurturing a normative commitment to autonomy amongst Korean intellectuals, socialist or otherwise.\(^\text{21}\) The history of the North Korean leadership’s resistance to colonial rule arguably made this commitment all the

\(^{16}\) Gerschenkron 1962: 24-25.  
^{17}\) Desai 2008: 400.  
^{18}\) Pyle 2007, 29.  
^{19}\) Nairn 1975, 23.  
^{20}\) Suny 1993, 4.  
stronger in the north after 1945. Indeed, it has been argued that Kim Il Sung’s early experiences as leader of an anti-Japanese guerrilla band contributed greatly to his views on national independence and self-reliance.22

Colonization had a profound impact on North Korean perceptions of underdevelopment and backwardness. Indeed, in his speeches and writings, Kim Il Sung made numerous explicit references to Korea’s “backward” (twittŏrŏjin) economy resulting from its colonial subjugation by Japan. As Kim argued in December 1946:

… our country’s economy has long been subordinated under Japanese imperialism and has been subject to its merciless colonial plunder. As a result, we had to start building a new, democratic Korea with a very backward and deformed economy, which moreover had been destroyed. Ours is still a backward country whose industrial development is still at a very low level … If our country is to be economically independent and catch up with the advanced countries in all fields, it must shake off its industrial backwardness to build an independent industry capable of manufacturing everything to meet its domestic needs.23

However, Kim also recognized that there were certain privileges associated with economic backwardness. He argued in 1965:

It is 300 years since England carried out the industrial revolution and nearly a century since Japan began to introduce modern technology. It is therefore impossible for us to catchup completely with the technical level of the advanced countries in a few years. However, we should not think that we will also need 100 or 300 years to acquire a high level of modern technology just because our industry has a short history.24

While Kim regarded the superiority of the socialist system as playing a key role in North Korea’s catch-up industrialization, he also cited the need for foreign technology:

If we are to have a thorough knowledge of our country, we must wipe out dogmatism and flunkeyism. Of course, this does not imply that we should close our doors. A knowledge of the world is necessary in order to know one’s country better, and the study of the advanced science and technology of other countries is necessary in order to catch up with the advanced countries and wipe out dogmatics and flunkeyism.25

North Korea, particularly following the massive destruction of the Korean War, represents one of the most prominent examples of catch-up industrialization in the post-colonial world. In the latter years of the Japanese Empire, colonial authorities established heavy industries and power plants in the north. North Korea’s geopolitical position on the frontline of the Asian Cold War led to massive international aid from socialist countries following the Korean War.26 As a result, by the end of the 1950s, North Korea was the most urbanized and industrialized Asian country after Japan.27 In addition to aid from the socialist bloc, this rapid industrialization was a result of the extraordinary mobilization of labour. Like China’s Great Leap Forward, the labor mobilization campaign known as the Chŏllima movement was an attempt at skipping developmental stages and catching up with and surpassing capitalist countries. As such, colonial

24Kim 1982a, 78.
25Kim 1983a, 91.
27Gray and Lee 2021, 82-83.
subjugation by Japan, the massive destruction of the Korean War, Korea’s status as a divided country and North Korea’s competition for legitimacy with the South, and the continued military standoff with the US all served to establish the task of national development as a matter of national survival.

This state-led response to the whip of external necessity in the form of state building and catch-up industrialization necessarily raised the question of a legitimating hegemonic ideology. In the first decade and a half following the founding of North Korea, the regime drew heavily on orthodox Marxism-Leninism from the Soviet Union. However, the consolidation of Kim Il Sung’s position along with growing geopolitical pressures of the 1960s, particularly in the context of the deepening Sino-Soviet split, led to an increased indigenization of Marxism-Leninism in the form of Juche thought as state ideology.

North Korean historiography claims that Kim Il Sung’s use of the term juche dates back to a meeting of the Leading Personnel of the Youth Communist League and the Anti-Imperialist Youth League in Kalun town in Jilin Province, China in June 1930. In reality, the use of the term in North Korean political discourse dates back to factional politics in the mid-1950s and Kim Il Sung’s December 1955 speech to Korean Workers’ Party propagandists and agitators titled, “On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work.” In this speech, Kim argued:

> Every effort should be made to discover and promote our national heritage. We should energetically learn from what is progressive internationally, but we should also develop the fine things of our own while introducing advanced culture … We should not mechanically copy the forms and methods of the Soviet Union but should learn from its experience in struggle and from the truth of Marxism-Leninism. Accordingly, while learning from the experience of the Soviet Union, we must put stress not on the form but on the essence of its experience.

Kim saw the slavish emulation of Soviet cultural, political, and economic practices as part of a broader practice of what is known in Korean as “flunkeyism” (sadaejuŭi), a remnant of a long history of glorifying the cultures, traditions, and political practices of more advanced countries by Koreans. The speech was therefore an attempt by Kim Il Sung to “… decolonize the Korean mind and establish an autonomous Korean subjectivity through abandoning sadaejuŭi and instilling a sense of national pride.” The immediate context, however, was the political changes then taking place within the Soviet Union following Stalin’s death and how new modes of thinking there impacted upon factional politics within North Korea. Following the Korean War, Kim Il Sung’s Manchurian Guerrilla faction had shared power and competed with the Yan’an faction comprised of Koreans who had fought with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the 1945-1949 Chinese civil war, and the Soviet faction, who were mostly ethnic Koreans living in the Soviet Union who had taken administrative roles as part of the post-liberation occupation. De-Stalinization in the Soviet Union encouraged both the Soviet and Yan’an factions to advocate for the development of light industry and agriculture over Kim’s preference for heavy industrialization. However, their foreign connections provided an opportunity for Kim to undermine their position through the promotion of Korean nationalism. As such,

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29 Person 2016, 214.
Kim’s use of the term *juche* in 1955 must be understood in the context of these ongoing factional power struggles and their implications for development strategy. The policy alternatives proposed by the Soviet and Yan’an factions were criticized by Kim as de-nationalized and as a form of external interference in North Korea’s domestic politics. By contrast, Kim presented himself as a protector of “Koreanness.”³⁰ Kim’s emphasis on a distinctive Korean Marxism-Leninism also had the added benefit of deflecting criticism by South Korea’s president at the time, Syngman Rhee, that communism was a break with Korean culture and a threat to Korea’s national identity.³¹

Kim Il Sung did not, however, use *juche* to attack the Soviet Union. Indeed, Kim’s 1955 speech was peppered with statements of praise for the Soviet Union and for Marxism-Leninism. Rather, his use of the term was a call for putting the interests of the Korean Revolution first and applying Marxism-Leninism to local conditions.³² As such, it was entirely logical to be critical of the wholesale importation of foreign ideologies that had not been adapted to local conditions. In this respect, Kim’s speech had close parallels with Mao Zedong’s 1940 speech “On New Democracy,” in which he argued that China had suffered from the mechanical absorption of foreign material and that it was necessary to integrate Marxism’s universal truths with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution. Mao argued that “Chinese culture should have its own form, its own national form. National in form and new - democratic in content - such is our new culture today.”³³

However, following Kim’s 1955 speech, *juche* was not used again publicly until the early 1960s when, with the deepening of the Sino-Soviet dispute, it was elaborated and developed into a system of thought.³⁴ After the Soviet Union halted its economic and military assistance to North Korea in response to the latter’s support for China, Kim increasingly emphasized the need for self-reliance and self-defence, alongside his own role as the founder of the great idea of *juche*.³⁵ This led to a shift in emphasis from merely an adaptation of Marxism-Leninism to local conditions towards a greater affinity with Third Worldist principles. This can be seen in Kim Il Sung’s speech in April 1965 at a meeting at the Ali Archam Social Science Academy marking the tenth anniversary of the Bandung Conference. In this speech, Kim stated: “*Juche* in ideology, self-support in the economy and self-reliance in national defence – this is the stand our Party has consistently adhered to.”³⁶ Indeed, these principles underpinned North Korea’s increased efforts in the 1970s to expand its linkages with Third World countries and liberation movements.³⁷

³¹Helgesen 1991, 197.
³²In this sense, Franz Schurmann’s distinction between pure and practical ideology in China under Mao Zedong is particularly apt here. Pure ideology refers to values such as moral and ethical conceptions about right and wrong. Practical ideology, on the other hand, emerges from the concrete conditions of the country concerned and refers to norms, i.e., rules which prescribe behaviour and are thus expected to have direct action consequences. In China, pure ideology takes the form of theories of Marxism-Leninism, including the importance of materialist forces of world history centered on class conflict, a process whereby the proletariat will emerge as the dominant class of all societies. Practical ideology, on the other hand, takes the form of Mao Zedong thought, which reflects the unification of universal truth and concrete practice. See Schurmann 1966, 38-46.
³³Mao 1965b, 381.
³⁴Lee 2000, 149-58.
³⁵Suh 1988, 307-08.
³⁶Kim 1982a, 306.
³⁷Young 2021.
Domestically, *Juche’s* stature was further strengthened through the establishment of the “Monolithic Ideological System” (*yuil sasang ch’egye*) in 1967. This involved the ostensible application of *Juche* principles to all fields of governance, including politics, economics, and national defense, as well as national reunification, international trade, science and technology, and international affairs, with absolute loyalty to Kim himself. Furthermore, after being included in the revised preamble of the Korean Workers’ Party bylaws at the Party’s Fifth Congress in 1970, *Juche* was codified into the DPRK’s 1972 Constitution. As the latter stated, “The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is guided in its activity by the *Juche* idea of the Workers’ Party of Korea which is a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to our country’s reality.” For some observers, this suggests that Marxism-Leninism was “supplanted” by *Juche* in the constitution, thereby representing at the very least a partial transformation of *Juche* from practical to pure ideology.\(^{38}\) Furthermore, in 1974, heir apparent Kim Jong Il defined Kimilsungism as a holistic system of ideas, theories, and methods with *Juche* at its core. Kim argued that Marxism-Leninism was based on an analysis of an earlier age of capitalism and imperialism, and as such, it was unable to provide answers to the challenges posed in the contemporary historical era. This implied that *Juche* was a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the Korean context.\(^ {39}\)

As the status of *Juche* thought became more prominent, there were conscious attempts to place it on a more substantive philosophical basis. Though the principles of self-reliance and autonomy continue to form the core, it has since the 1960s evolved from a political slogan into a worldview with a philosophical structure. It was at this point that the implicit voluntarism of *Juche* was made explicit and elevated to its defining characteristic. As Kim Il Sung remarked in a 1972 interview with Japanese journalists:

> The basis of the *Juche* idea is that man is the master of all things and decides everything. The remaking of nature and society is also for the benefit of the people and it is work done by them. Man is the most precious thing in the world and he is also the most powerful.\(^ {40}\)

At the same time, *Juche* maintained its normative emphasis on autonomy in politics, self-sufficiency in economy, and self-reliance in defense. Kim Jong Il argued that these principles reflect human’s essential characteristics as social beings who possess autonomy, creativity, and consciousness. This increasingly explicit voluntarism is distinguished, however, from idealism:

> Attaching decisive importance to the ideological factor is a law of revolutionary movement. Material factors too play a great part in the revolutionary movement, but the existence of material conditions does not give rise to revolution automatically. How to make use of these material conditions depends on people’s conscious activity.\(^ {41}\)

Kim continued:

> … waiting with folded arms for all conditions to ripen is tantamount to refusing to make a revolution. Primary importance, therefore, should be given to the ideological factor in the

\(^{38}\)Chung 2007, 62.  
\(^{39}\)Cheong 2011, 101.  
\(^{40}\)Kim 1984, 400.  
\(^{41}\)Kim 1982b, 35.
revolutionary struggle and construction work, and on this basis, strenuous efforts should be made to create all the necessary conditions.\textsuperscript{42}

This emphasis on the human-centred dimensions of \textit{Juche} was related to attempts to legitimize hereditary succession. This was to be achieved both through Kim Jong Il’s presentation of himself as the pre-eminent theorist of \textit{Juche} and more generally through the explicit theorization of the all-important role of the leader (\textit{suryŏng}) in the revolution. In certain respects, \textit{Juche} bears close parallels to Leninism in its claim that while the working masses constitute “the subject of history and the motive force of social progress … \textsuperscript{43} only under correct leadership would the masses, though creators of history, be able to occupy the position and perform their role as subject of socio-historical development.”\textsuperscript{44} However, \textit{Juche} came to emphasize the role of a supreme leader as an almost God-like figure without whose guidance the masses would be unable to act collectively, develop revolutionary consciousness, or discern the correct path towards their socialist identity.\textsuperscript{45} In 1986, Kim Jong Il took the role of the leader even further in a discussion of the relations between the leader, the party, and the masses. He declared that leader is the errorless brain of the living body, the masses are the living body that is able to maintain its life only through loyalty to the leader, and the party is the nervous system that organizationally links the masses to the leader.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{Pre- and early modern antecedents of North Korean voluntarism}

As can be seen, \textit{Juche} was developed in accordance with a number of factors reflecting North Korea’s position within the geopolitics of the Cold War and the whip of external necessity. These included the specificities of the Korean communist movement and how its international linkages affected the factional politics of the 1950s; de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union and the resulting political expediency of emphasizing the indigenous basis of the Korean Revolution; the Sino-Soviet split and the nationalist imperative for North Korea to avoid leaning too heavily on one side; and the need to legitimize the authority of a supreme leader as well as hereditary succession. These factors explain the imperative to develop an indigenous ideology but they do not explain why North Korean state ideology has come to possess such explicitly voluntaristic tendencies. As noted in the introduction, \textit{Juche} morphed into a set of ideas that appeared to place greater emphasis on the role of human than on deterministic economic laws, thereby allegedly “turning Marx on his head.” A key explanation for this has been the influence of Korea’s pre- and early modern cultural traditions and systems of thought.

It should of course not be surprising that North Korean state ideology has absorbed aspects of existing cultural forms and ideological landscapes. Indeed, a universal feature of developmental nationalism is that it exhibits spatially differentiated manifestations. Under conditions of uneven and combined development, there is a secular tendency in the emergence of modern nationalisms to adopt and adapt pre-existing cultures

\textsuperscript{42}Kim 1982b, 36.  
\textsuperscript{43}Kim 1982b, 15.  
\textsuperscript{44}Kim 1982b, 18.  
\textsuperscript{45}Lerner 2010, 17.  
\textsuperscript{46}Kim 2012, 125.
and ideologies of collective identity. Unable to literally copy advanced countries, developing countries take what they want from existing developmental ideologies and combine this with their own native social forms. Populations need to be mobilized to take this historical short-cut, and this occurs through the conscious formation of an inter-class community aware of its own mythical separate identity vis-à-vis outside forces. In this vein, the question of whether Juche falls under the ideal type of Marxism-Leninism or constitutes an indigenous form of ideology is the wrong one. Rather, Juche should be understood as a combined ideological form of development nationalism, based on Marxist-Leninist origins but consciously fused with existing modes of thought that have attained the status of what Gramsci referred to as “common sense.”

Indeed, Gramsci’s theory of ideology provides an insight into how the process of unevenness and combination operates within the ideological realm. He argued that “[a] particular ideology ... born in a highly developed country, is disseminated in less developed countries, impinging on the local interplay of combinations.” As part of this process, ideologies also fuse with existing forms of “common sense,” a confused and contradictory formation Gramsci drew in part from philosophy as conventionally understood but also from people’s material experiences of social life. It is through common sense that the subordinate classes have organized their experiences. It is the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed, but it is also the site of resistance and challenge to this ideology. In this sense, a Gramscian approach sheds light on how inter-societal dynamics lead to particular reactions in late developing societies that give rise to combined forms of ideology: fusions of popular belief, religion, and folklore with more official conceptions of industrialism, nationalism, capitalist modernity, and catch-up development.

What were these forms of common sense that Juche drew from? Scholars have in the first instance drawn parallels between Juche and Confucianism. The Korean variant of neo-Confucian thought was particularly conservative and placed a strong normative emphasis on the benevolent role of the emperor, filial piety, and the use of familial metaphors to describe the role of the ruler and government, hierarchy, and submission to authority. Mitchell Lerner has argued that these values foreshadowed Juche in important ways, with the latter’s emphasis on national traditions, the preservation of existing institutions, and obedience to higher authority finding a receptive audience in North Korea. Of particular importance is Confucianism’s emphasis on teaching individuals how they should fit into a greater social network and ensuring that they are fulfilling their roles in their families and societies. In this respect, there are clear parallels between Juche and Confucianism’s emphasis on the centrality of humans and their theorization of leaders, the family-like structure of society, and the imperative of filial piety. Bruce Cumings has drawn parallels between Juche’s emphasis on ideological consciousness and the thought of fourteenth century neo-Confucian scholar Chŏng Tojŏn, whose discussion of virtue as

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47 Matin 2019, 438.
48 Nairn 1975, 10-14.
49 Gramsci 1971, 182.
50 Simon 1982, 64.
51 Lerner 2010, 14-15.
53 Kurbanov 2019, 301-303.
embodied in the mind through cultivation has led Cumings to argue that “North Korea is closer to a neo-Confucian kingdom than to Stalin’s Russia.”

Other scholars have traced the roots of Juche not in Confucianism per se, but to the reformist Sirhak (practical learning) movement that emerged during the Chosŏn Dynasty. With the increasing monopolization of political power by a small number of Yangban houses during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of the Yangban were frustrated by their inability to play a role in governance. Sirhak was a critique of those in power as well as an attempt to change the political and social order. Sirhak scholars conducted studies of political, economic, and social institutions as a means of presenting their own visions of how society should be organized. These include a proposal by scholar Yi Ik (1681-1763) for an “equal field system” that would guarantee in perpetuity to each peasant household the land necessary to meet their livelihood needs. Chŏng Yagyŏng (1762-1836) went further, proposing a “village land system” whereby land would be owned in common by each village, with the harvest apportioned on the basis of the labor performed by each individual. Though it may be far-fetched to argue that these Sirhak proposals explain North Korea’s land-to-the-tiller reforms of 1946 and collectivization in the 1950s, Kim Il Sung explicitly mentioned prominent Sirhak scholars in his speeches and writings. It is no coincidence that, by 1955, the North Korean Ministry of Culture and Propaganda and the State Publishing House were publishing histories and appraisals of Chŏng Yagyŏng. By the late 1960s, however, the authorities became more cautious about emphasizing Sirhak. Kim Il Sung argued in 1969:

At one time some scholars gave undue prominence to [Chŏng Yagyŏng] and other people belonging to the Sirhak school and over-rated their thought. This exerted an undesirable influence on the ideological education of working people and the instruction of students.

This seeming reversal regarding Chŏng and the Sirhak scholars coincided with the anti-Confucian campaign during China’s Cultural Revolution, although by the mid- to late-1980s, interest in Sirhak had been revived to stress Korean traditional interests in science and technology.

Scholars have also drawn parallels between Juche and Korea’s indigenous religion of Ch’ŏndogyo. The latter originated in “Eastern Learning” (Tonghak), a millenarian doctrine that emerged in the 1850s and was itself a combination of elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Catholicism. This religious and social movement became the basis of peasant rebellions throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, often in response to foreign encroachment. Sergei Kurbanov notes a number of similarities between Ch’ŏndogyo and Juche: they both place humans at the center of the universe and seek to change the world in revolutionary ways; they define the task of social development as the establishment of “heaven on earth” (chisangch’ŏng’uk in Ch’ŏndogyo, chisangnagwŏn in Juche); and they believe their doctrines are the key to universal human
happiness. Finally, Ch’ŏndogyo also contains its own Juche ideas (chuch’esasang), which it regards as the final and highest stage of theory, surpassing both communism and capitalism.\textsuperscript{61}

Beyond drawing broad parallels and highlighting similarities between Juche and traditional systems of thought, it is difficult to draw explicit connections given the dominant tendency within North Korean official discourse to present the Kim family as the primary architect of Juche. Nonetheless, it is clear that key themes and concepts have been drawn from the country’s existing cultural forms to formulate a distinctive brand of developmental nationalism. North Korean state ideology has implicitly drawn on these ideational resources to establish a collective subjectivity that appeals to the prevailing common sense. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, the tension between seeking to emulate the more advanced countries and lauding the superiority of one’s own cultural forms is typical of all nationalist thought.\textsuperscript{62} Thus, what we see in the case of North Korea is a melding of Korea’s pre- and early modern traditions with Marxism-Leninism. The question is not therefore one of Marxism-Leninism or a uniquely North Korean ideology but rather one of tracing the process of this combination.

This drawing on pre-modern cultural forms is by no means limited to North Korea. In discussing how Stalin actively promoted the cult of Lenin after the latter’s death, Isaac Deutscher argues that when Marxism was transplanted to Russia, it absorbed elements of Orthodox Christianity, assimilating itself to the nation’s spiritual climate, traditions, customs, and habits. Indeed, the fact that Stalin spent his formative years in an Orthodox seminary made it natural that he would serve to fuse Marxism with Russia’s own spiritual traditions.\textsuperscript{63} Such influences can also be seen in Stalin’s semi-religious views on party membership. The party was not to be a loose assemblage of unorganized supporters of a program but an organized association of the elect. Stalin referred to membership as the party’s “holy of holies,” suggesting that being a party member was akin to belonging to the priesthood of a revolutionary church. As Stalin argued, “only the party committees can worthily lead us, they alone light up for us the path to the ‘promised land’ called the world of socialism!”\textsuperscript{64} What Deutscher does not argue, however, is that in drawing on such traditions, state ideology under Stalin should be seen as an indigenous ideology. Indeed, even in strictly logical terms, it is unlikely that pre-modern ideas such as Confucianism or Orthodox Christianity could replace modern political ideologies such as socialism in terms of providing solutions to the challenges of political rule in modern societies.

But why exactly does ideology play such a key role in contexts such as North Korea? Here again we can return to Gramsci and his theory of ideology as constituting a set of power relations aimed at buttressing political rule. Ideology in Gramsci’s carceral writings is closely linked to his concept of hegemony, although these terms are not entirely reducible to each other. He defined hegemony as “intellectual and moral leadership” by the dominant class over subordinate classes. While he believed that a material basis to hegemony is indispensable,\textsuperscript{65} this intellectual and moral leadership emphasizes ideology

\textsuperscript{61}Kurbanov 2019, 299-301.
\textsuperscript{62}Chatterjee 1986, 37.
\textsuperscript{63}Deutscher 1961, 269-270.
\textsuperscript{64}Tucker 1973, 129.
\textsuperscript{65}Gramsci 1971, 161.
as the cement that holds together the diverse social elements that together constitute a hegemonic historical bloc. For Gramsci, the latter is an entity “… in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form … the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces.” Gramsci’s theory of ideology can thus be seen as a departure from the pejorative notion of “false consciousness” found in Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology.* Indeed, he saw ideas not as a realm separate from and determined by the material structure of life but as an integral part of it. As such, historically organic ideologies (namely those that are necessary to a given social structure) have a psychological validity: they organize human masses and create the terrain on which men move, acquire the consciousness of their position, and struggle.

Gramsci saw ideological hegemony as existing primarily within the realms of civil society, which in Europe at the time had become a crucial realm between state and society. As Gramsci famously argued, “… in the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society.” States in what he called “the East,” however, were no less inclined to establish a hegemonic worldview as a means of unifying society and legitimizing political rule. While coercion may be more prominent in such contexts, no ruling class is able to rule on the basis of coercion alone. Indeed, even Stalin required a degree of consent when he ruled the Soviet Union. However, this can be better understood as what Joseph Femia terms “limited hegemony,” not least because civil society in authoritarian states is strongly regulated by the state in a direct corporatist fashion while truly autonomous associational life is strictly proscribed. In such cases, there is no pretense of the liberal separation of powers, although the “outer ditches” are rather feeble defenses for political society, as was demonstrated after 1989 in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

However, limited hegemony in non-liberal states can paradoxically be seen as intensifying the imperative for the ideological justification of authoritarian developmentalism. Catch-up industrialization typically demands the repression of household consumption and the transfer of resources from agriculture to industry, and in certain cases, the mass mobilization of society amidst an absence of material incentives. The North Korean case can be seen as a particularly extreme example of this. The pervading sense of backwardness and the strong belief that state building and catch-up industrialization were the guarantors of national survival meant that development could not be left to linear stages of history but required active intervention from above, thereby exaggerating the voluntaristic tendencies of *Juche.* However, as has been shown, these tendencies found fortuitous parallels in Korea’s humanistic pre- and early modern systems of thought.

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67Marx and Engels 1938.
69Gramsci 1971, 238. Gramsci’s East-West distinction potentially raises similar objections in relation to Trotsky’s notion of backwardness (see above). For Gramsci, however, the term did not imply only a geographical distinction but also a temporal one. Gramsci’s main point was that the methods of the 1917 Russian Revolution would not work elsewhere in Europe due to the emergence of mass politics and the increasing hegemony of the bourgeoisie in what he called the “West.”
71Femia 1981, 47.
North Korean idealogues drew on themes that were already established as common sense in Korean society to produce a form of developmental nationalism apposite to the country’s leap towards modernity.

**Turning Marx on his head?**

While Korea’s pre- and early modern thought systems have strong parallels with *Juche*’s strong voluntarism, it is questionable whether voluntarism and an emphasis on human subjectivity in itself amounts to a departure from the “objective laws” of Marxism-Leninism. Neither Marx nor Engels relied solely on structural economic factors to put forward their theory of history. Certainly, in *The German Ideology* and in the Preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, they set out in no uncertain terms a materialist theory of history whereby consciousness is largely a social product that is determined by social existence. However, Marx’s more historical works, such as the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and *Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, place a great deal more emphasis on the political and ideological superstructures than on the economic base. This is true even of *Capital*, which contains a rich historical account of superstructural elements that played a crucial role in the development of capitalism in England.  

However, this voluntaristic emphasis became more prominent after the deaths of Marx and Engels. This reflected in part the fact that the Russian Revolution was an apparent refutation of the alleged objective laws of history and testament to the importance of political organization and human agency, or what Gramsci referred to as the “revolution against Capital” (meaning Marx’s *Das Kapital*). As Gramsci argued shortly after the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks were not Marxists in the sense that they adhered to a “rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances never to be questioned … their thought sees as the dominant factor in history, not raw economic facts, but man, men in societies, men in relation to one another.” In a similar vein, Lenin stressed the role of the vanguard party’s leadership in imparting revolutionary consciousness to the working class.

While the affirmation of the supremacy of voluntaristic man over deterministic nature was at this time largely limited to the revolutionary process itself, the establishment of state socialism in the Soviet Union led to the establishment of Marxism-Leninism as a ruling state ideology. Although the Comintern under Stalin promoted a “stagist” view of history as theoretical justification for the often-disastrous united front policies of the Soviet Union in its foreign relations, domestically Stalin emphasized the primacy of politics and consciousness over economics during the era of state building. In his report to the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, he argued, “[t]here can be no justification for references to so-called objective conditions … the part played by so-called objective conditions has been reduced to a minimum; whereas the part played by our organizations and their leaders has become decisive, exceptional.”

Stalin’s emphasis on human will over objective conditions and superstructure over the base reflects the fact that strict economic determinism contradicted the then growing cult

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73Gramsci 1977, 34-35.
74Lenin 1969, 31-32.
75Stalin 1954, 374.
of personality surrounding Lenin and Stalin. However, the state, far from withering away, was a key agent of the Soviet Union’s catch-up industrialization plans. Indeed, Stalin’s remarks were a rationalization for the socio-economic changes wrought by conscious political design during the preceding decade, a process which Stalin explicitly referred to as a revolution from above. Catch-up industrialization necessitated the extraordinary mobilization of human and material resources under the auspices of an authoritarian state. This ran directly counter to Engels’ prediction that the transition from capitalism to socialism would lead to the consignment of the state to the “museum of antiquities,” a view that was significantly problematized by the emergence of *state* socialism. As Stalin argued, the state could not simply be allowed to wither away due to the capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union, given the key role of the military, punitive, and intelligence organs in the context of foreign attack.

Thus, with parallels to the claims made above regarding the Hegelian (re)turn of *Juche*, Vernon Aspaturian argued in the 1950s that the failure of the Soviet state to wither away “forced the dialectic out of its materialist shell back towards its Hegelian origin.” For Stalin, “Russia was a mound of clay waiting to be moulded into a communist society with political instruments at the disposal of men with the necessary will and persistence to dictate the course of history in the illusion that they were following its objective and implacable mandate.” This has been no less true elsewhere, since rapid and comprehensive industrialization has been seen as a key prerequisite for the achievement of full socialism. In his 1937 essay “On Contradictions,” Mao Zedong wrote:

… the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role.

Such comments have led to similar interpretations of Mao Zedong’s thought as representing a departure from Marxism-Leninism that has more to do with traditional Chinese culture and longstanding pre-modern conceptions about the infinite malleability of the external environment. As such, the increasing tendency ever since the Zhou period towards voluntarism and subjectivism, which culminated in Wang Yangming’s activist brand of Neo-Confucianism, is seen by some scholars as having greatly inspired Mao and many other twentieth century Chinese intellectuals. However, as in North Korea, this emphasis on voluntarism, subjectivism, and the role of the superstructure in facilitating transformation was no doubt meant to legitimize the guiding role of the state in the catch-up industrialization process in concert with the mobilization of human labor. Indeed, the Great Leap Forward, although disastrous in its ultimate consequences, is the most succinct example of a voluntarist faith in the role that mass mobilization could play in enabling China to skip development stages, and in Mao’s words, overtake Britain in production of steel and other products within fifteen years. Stuart

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76Engels 1940, 198.
77Stalin 1978, 412. See also Stock’s insightful discussion of the parallels between *Juche* and East Germany’s Marxism-Leninism (Stock 2020).
78Aspaturian 1954, 1033.
79Aspaturian 1954, 1038-1039.
80Mao 1965a, 336. Emphasis added
81Chong 1996, 139-140.
Schram argued that the Great Leap Forward amounted to the “...the greatest orgy of voluntarist thinking and action in the history of the communist movement.”\textsuperscript{82} Mao’s slogan of “politics takes command” implied that politics was the “soul” of organizational life and was capable of exerting a decisive influence on the economic infrastructure. \textsuperscript{83}

As can be seen, therefore, far from maintaining a dogmatic emphasis on the role of structural objective factors, Stalinism and Maoism were themselves shaped by the consequences of uneven and combined development in that they came to emphasize the role of human agency and consciousness in the developmental process. The voluntarism of \textit{Juche} should likewise be seen as a form of developmental nationalism aimed at justifying the leading role of state institutions and national leadership along with the mass mobilization of society towards state building and catch-up industrialization. In this respect, so-called objective laws of history provide little guidance or ideological grounding for states seeking to skip developmental stages. Given the breadth and speed of North Korea’s late development, it is hardly surprising that state ideology possesses such voluntaristic traits. However, \textit{Juche} ideology is aided in this endeavour by its ability to drawn upon certain existing systems of thought that have established themselves as forms of Gramscian common sense in Korean society.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The existing literature on \textit{Juche} has tended to dwell on the question of whether it should be understood in terms of its Marxist-Leninist origins or whether it is better understood as a \textit{sui generis} North Korea ideology with its roots in pre- and early modern systems of thought. I have challenged this binary opposition by arguing that \textit{Juche} should be viewed as a combined ideological form. It is of course not surprising that political ideologies, religions, and other systems of thought typically exhibit spatially divergent manifestations and fusions with indigenous forms, even if this process has at best been undertheorized in the existing literature on North Korean ideology. However, my more substantive aim in this article has been to examine the explicit voluntarism of \textit{Juche} within the framework of Leon Trotsky’s concept of uneven and combined development and Antonio Gramsci’s materialist conception of ideology. As I have argued, the exaggerated voluntarism of \textit{Juche} is an outcome of a fortuitous correspondence of the imperatives of state building and late development, and the cultural legacies of humanistic pre-modern systems of thought. The latter were particularly apposite for a state-led response to the whip of external necessity through the establishment of a national popular will. By understanding ideology as embodying a set of hierarchical power relations, developmental nationalisms such as \textit{Juche} play a crucial role in legitimizing the extraordinary sacrifices required of the population for the purpose of late development.

What then does this tell us about the question I posed at the very outset of this article, that of the role of \textit{Juche} as a potential barrier to North Korea’s transition towards a Chinese or Vietnamese-style reformed socialism? Understood as a form of developmental nationalism, the key tenets of \textit{Juche} appear rather unremarkable in the context of post-colonial late development. However, \textit{Juche} ideology’s commitment to autonomy

\textsuperscript{82} Schram 1967, 160.

\textsuperscript{83} King 1977, 366.
and self-reliance do appear out of sync with the proliferation of global production networks and with what Whittaker et al. refer to as the emergence of “thin industrialization” as the predominant global developmental paradigm.\textsuperscript{84} Juche is, however, rather too vague and malleable to be considered in itself a hard constraint on the policy options of North Korean elites. The onset of reform and opening in China, for example, saw the abandonment of Maoism, which, as I have argued, shared many of the key features of Juche. However, it is difficult to argue that the Chinese party-state abandoned its broader commitment to national autonomy, and indeed, selective integration into the global economy was seen as a means of reviving China’s moribund economy as a precondition and thereby guarantor of the continuity of party-state rule. More recently, Xi Jinping has extolled the virtues of globalization while responding to increased tensions with the United States through a somewhat vaguely defined “dual circulation” strategy aimed at making the economy less reliant on global supply chains. Similarly, the human-centered outlook of Juche is too abstract to dictate any particular orientation towards the global economy. In this respect, developmental nationalism can be seen as inherently adaptable and capable of co-existing with a variety of modes of insertion into the international system.

As such, the materialist conception of ideology put forward in this paper suggests that Juche should be understood more in terms of its role in reproducing the (limited) hegemonic rule of the North Korean party-state rather than providing a specific policy blueprint. While North Korea’s hereditary politics have certainly led to a remarkable continuity in the country’s formal ideological worldview, it is difficult to see the regime’s failure to carry out genuine reform as a result of ideology \textit{per se} but rather as a path dependent response to the particular historical challenges of domestic rule within the country and external pressures from without. Although beyond the scope of this article, the more salient challenges include factors such as the continued standoff with the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia, the legitimacy challenges associated with the fact that North Korea remains one half of a divided peninsula engaged in competition with a manifestly more successful adversary, and the related challenges of maintaining political rule in a society which has long suffered the hardships caused by a largely dysfunctional system of economic management. It is those conditions rather than any particular set of ideas or ideological commitments that arguably constitute the greater barrier to any Chinese or Vietnamese-style reformed socialism, and should those conditions change, Juche may well prove adaptable enough to justify greater external engagement as a means to secure autonomy and self-reliance.

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\textsuperscript{84}Whittaker et al. 2020, 31.
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