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An Urbanistic Analysis of New Rural Theses of the Kim Jong-un Era

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The 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) adopted a new doctrine of socialist rural construction in North Korea. This paper illuminates how symptomatic characteristics found in the 'urbanization of rural areas' are manifested in new rural theses under the Kim Jong-un era. Urbanization of rural areas highlights spatial changes in agricultural villages, reflecting material and discursive connections between rural and urban areas instead of viewing rural and urban areas as separate, independent entities. In sum, rural-based urban ideology (the so-called 'following Pyongyang' and 'following Samjiyon'), manifested in Kim Jong-un's new rural theses, can help North Korean authorities 1) stably maintain the functions of rural areas as a base for providing food for the urban population, and 2) defuse potential complaints of the people regarding the rural underdevelopment.

The 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) adopted a new doctrine of socialist rural construction in North Korea in late December, 2021. This doctrine bears a resemblance to Kim Il-sung's "Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country"¹⁾ adopted at The 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of WPK of 1964, given that this doctrine was directly

reported by Chairman Kim Jong-un and unanimously adopted at the meeting.

This paper illuminates how symptomatic characteristics in the ‘urbanization of rural areas’ are manifested in new rural theses under the Kim Jong-un era. Urbanization of rural areas highlights spatial changes in rural areas reflecting material and discursive connections between rural and urban areas instead of viewing rural and urban areas as separate, independent entities. In sum, rural-based urban ideology (the so-called, ‘following Pyongyang,’ ‘following Samjiyon’), manifested in Kim Jong-un’s new rural theses, can help North Korean authorities 1) stably maintain the functions of rural areas as a base for providing food for the urban population, and 2) defuse potential complaints of the people regarding the rural underdevelopment.

Spatial Implications of Kim Il-sung’s Rural Theses

Grasping new characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s rural theses primarily requires examining Kim Il-sung’s rural theses. Kim Il-sung’s rural theses can be divided into rural and urban areas depending on where a series of strategies specified in the theses would be implemented. One can refer to the French communist party’s theorist and urban theorist Henry Lefebvre’s book, *The Urban Revolution*, published in 1970 to understand the relationship between rural and urban areas as described in Kim Il-sung’s rural theses.

In this book, Henry Lefebvre defines a city not in a typical sense of dense space, full of the administrative institutions, high-rise buildings, and cultural facilities, but through a new concept of ‘urban fabric,’ highlighting how non-urban spaces (rural areas, suburban areas, natural spaces, etc.) are being encompassed as part of the urbanization process. In other words, he captures the increasingly close interconnections between urban and non-urban areas and the growing ambiguous

1) Kim Il-sung, “Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country,” to *Fulfill Socialist Rural Theses 1* (Pyongyang: The Workers’ Party of Korea Publishing House, 1994), recited in pp. 1~50.

boundaries that traditionally separate city and non-city. He argues that although urban dwellers' villas, highways, and power plants are located outside a city, their existence serves urban dwellers to maintain their way of life.

As rural areas have come under the influence of urban culture, rural villagers have come to desire city dwellers' way of life, which leads to the emergence of 'urbanization of rural areas' to fulfill such desire. However, having rural areas included as part of the urban fabric is not one-sided relations in which rural areas are exploited to serve city dwellers. This paper is grounded in Henry Lefebvre's insights, which approach rural spaces as part of the urban fabric.

Let's first examine rural space envisioned in Kim Il-sung's rural theses. Kim Il-sung proposed three revolutions of "thoroughly conducting technological revolution, cultural revolution, and ideological revolution in rural areas"²⁾ to resolve rural issues. In February 1994, Kim Il-sung released a paper to celebrate the 30th anniversary of creating his rural theses, titled *For an Ultimate Solution of the Rural Question under the Banner of Socialist Rural Theses*. He proclaimed that the three revolutions presented in this rural theses had made "phenomenal achievements."³⁾ He pointed out the importance of continued revolutionary movements, arguing that these revolutions should be advanced and elevated⁴⁾ to 'fundamentally resolve' the issues at hand. Similar to Henry Lefebvre's argument for the urbanization of rural areas is also manifested in Kim Il-sung's rural theses. For example, Kim Il-sung maintained that "various cultural facilities should be established in the county, such as schools, hospitals, movie theaters, book stores, and libraries."⁵⁾ Kim Il-sung's argument for the need to establish urban infrastructure in rural areas resembles Henry Lefebvre's claim for the urbanization of the rural regions. Kim Il-sung highlighted not only a revolution in "rural areas"⁶⁾ but also the city's role outside the rural villages to

2) Kim Il-sung, "Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country," p. 4.

3) Kim Il-sung, *For an Ultimate Solution of the Rural Question under the Banner of Socialist Rural Theses* (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing House, 2019 (1994)), p. 10.

4) op. cit., p. 12.

5) Kim Il-sung, "Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country," p. 40.

6) op. cit., p. 4.

resolve rural issues. As he stated in his rural theses that “the industry is the key sector of the people’s economy and cities are going ahead of rural areas in all aspects of politics, economy, and culture ,”⁷⁾ the gap between industry and agriculture was quite distinct in urban and rural areas. To bridge that gap, he pointed out the need for “advanced cities to support the agricultural villages to elevate their backward level to that of city”⁸⁾ and the importance for “cities to support the rural villages.”⁹⁾

Kim Il-sung stated that his rural theses were devised to “steadfastly safeguard the interests of the country’s entire workers in the country,”¹⁰⁾ including farmers. Such a statement can be interpreted as him advocating the general interests of the people. At the same time, such a statement also contains the notion of spatial selectivity, which prioritizes the urban over the rural, given that it puts weight in functional importance of rural areas as a “more robust base for food and resources to enrich the urban dwellers and for the benefit of the industry.”¹¹⁾ These two arguments are mutually complementary rather than conflicting, given that general interests-advocating ideology serves as a curtain to hide spatial selectivity. The same mutually complementary approach can also be applied to the urbanization of rural areas and the supporting rural-based urban ideology as symptomatically found in Kim Jong-un’s new rural theses.

Symptomatic Characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s ‘New Rural Theses’: The Urbanization of Rural Areas

In fact, before the recent announcement of his new rural theses, Kim Jong-un already released a paper titled *Let Us Bring About Innovations in Agricultural Production Under the Unfurled Banner of the Socialist Rural Theses* in February

7) op. cit., p. 8.

8) op. cit., p. 8.

9) op. cit., p. 7.

10) op. cit., p. 2.

11) op. cit., p. 20.

2014 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Kim Il-sung's rural theses.¹²⁾ Let's first examine the difference between inherited similarities and the difference between Kim Il-sung's version and that of Kim Jong-un by applying the framework of analyzing Kim Il-sung's rural these through the spatial dimension. Although Kim Jong-un embraced the three revolutions in rural areas, he particularly focused on the technological revolution among the three. As the title of the paper containing the wording 'agricultural production' suggests, 19 pages of a total of 23 pages were allocated to introducing various farming techniques (new organic farming, combined management of forestry and agriculture, etc.) to boost productivity. On the contrary, the paper only briefly mentioned the ideological and cultural revolutions stating that they have been "successfully implemented."¹³⁾

Let's move on to identify the difference of rural these between Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-un. Although Kim Jong-un's 2014 paper inherited three rural revolutions (in particular, technological revolution), it did not touch upon the urbanization of rural areas, which is another strategy tailored to rural areas specified in Kim Il-sung's rural these. The city's role was not meaningfully addressed in the paper stating only that "the gap between city and farming village has significantly declined."¹⁴⁾

Kim Jong-un selectively inherited some elements of Kim Il-sung's three revolutions (focusing more on technological revolution and less on the rest two). The role of the city in addressing rural issues has significantly weakened. Those changes are attributed to Kim Jong-un's priority to resolve food shortages, which put people's survival at stake amidst the continued sanctions dating back to Kim Jong-il's era and economic difficulties since the initial phase of his regime.

Let's now review Kim Jong-un's new rural theses. Kim Il-sung's three revolutions had been defined and inherited as "an essential task to resolve rural issues under

12) Kim Jong-un, *Let Us Bring About Innovations in Agricultural Production Under the Unfurled Banner of the Socialist Rural Theses* (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing House, 2014).

13) op. cit., p. 2.

14) op. cit., p. 2.

socialism,” as described in Kim Jong-un’s 2014 paper. As his 2014 paper presents new farming methods such as organic farming and combined management of forestry and agriculture in the technological revolution, the technological revolution of the new rural theses in 2022 corresponds to Kim Jong-un regime’s policy direction that emphasizes informatization and science technology. Such technological revolution also presents a new direction and slogan of turning agricultural workers into “workers equipped with the knowledge,” seeking “scientification, informatization, and concentration” and pursuing the “doctrine of putting science-based farming first.” Resolving food shortages remains a priority as Kim Jong-un views “continuously improving agricultural production” as an “overarching and pressing task” amidst the aggravated challenges caused by sanctions and COVID-19. There exists a continuum of the ideological revolution given that Kim Il-sung’s argument for the need to eliminate “the antiquated remnants of the ideology embedded in the consciousness of farmers”¹⁵⁾ shares a similarity with Kim Jong-un’s claim for the need to “root out the antiquated ideology remained in the minds of agricultural workers.” This can be understood as a reflection of the strengthening of ‘austerity and devotion-oriented ideology’ stressed throughout the Plenary Meeting into rural these.¹⁶⁾ Lastly, the cultural revolution of the new rural theses highlights the need to continuously promote, propagate, and expand a “capital (Pyongyang)-oriented culture, working class-oriented culture, and era-specific representative culture in rural and agricultural villages, thereby driving the rural cultural revolution.” While technological and ideological revolutions are a “stick” to enhance productivity for rural dwellers, propagating Pyongyang-oriented culture and era-specific representative culture, as underscored in the cultural revolution, is a ‘carrot’ to offset such sticks. Cultural revolution is closely related to the urbanization of rural areas examined below.

15) Kim Il-sung, “Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country,” p. 6.

16) North Korean Research Division, Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), “Analysis on North Korea’s 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea,” (KINU Online Series CO22-01, 2022.1.1.), <<https://kinu.or.kr/www/jsp/prg/api/dlV.jsp?menuIdx=351&category=53&thisPage=1&searchField=&searchText=&bibliId=1550043>> (date accessed: 2022.1.11.).

<Table 1> Comparison of Rural Theses between Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-un

Previous Theses / Highlighted Space	Kim Il-sung's Rural Theses	Kim Jong-un's 2014 Paper	Kim Jong-un's New Rural Theses
Rural Areas	Three Revolutions + Urbanization of Rural Areas	Selective Inheritance of the Three Revolutions (Focused on Technological Revolution)	Inheritance of the Three Revolutions + Urbanization of the Rural Areas
Urban Areas	Cities to Support the Rural Villages	Less Focus Given	No Mentioning

Source: Written by Author

Another new characteristic of Kim Jong-un's new rural theses, worth noting, is the urbanization of rural areas, which was not addressed in his 2014 paper. New rural theses first describe the existing three revolutions and then elaborates on the urbanization of the rural regions stating that "our party's rural construction policy aims to turn all the agricultural village into the rich and civil socialist ideal village" in the near future, which can match up the level of a rural village in Samjiyon city. 'Samjiyon city's farming village' is defined as an example for other agricultural villages to follow as specified in the new rural theses. Samjiyon once belonged to a county (郡), defined as rural areas, until December 2019, when it was elevated to the city. Samjiyon was turned into a city after Kim Jong-un's order of turning Samjiyon into a "city like Pyongyang" led to the redevelopment in the late 2010s. Unique naming such as 'Samjiyon city's agricultural village' well captures the characteristics of the urbanization of rural areas, whose boundaries have increasingly become ambiguous in connection with urban areas. This then begets the question of why Kim Jong-un has emphasized the urbanization of the rural regions?

Kim Jong-un only emphasized agricultural production and did not emphasize the urbanization of rural areas in his 2014 paper. He presumably reckoned that improved food situation would naturally resolve issues of people's living standards for farm

villages, laying out the foundation for stable governance. However, Kim Jong-un has witnessed the emergence of yet another social conflict, uneven development between urban and rural areas, which was predicted and concerned by Kim Il-sung.

In last year's Voluntary National Review (VNR) that reported the implementation status of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), North Korea acknowledged the uneven development between rural and urban areas. It also announced the ongoing implementation of measures to resolve that imbalance, which is an exceptional admission on the part of North Korea. Such a statement indicates that people's sense of being marginalized and the subsequent grievances must have been rampant, especially for rural dwellers residing in the underdeveloped region. It is also evidenced by the dramatic rise of the slogan of having local residents at the forefront of rural development ("fierce competition among province, county, and city," "competition based on the spirit of self-reliance [Charkyok Kaengsaeng]," etc.) broadcast in North Korean media since last year. The phenomenal, spectacular developments witnessed through media from Yeomyeong street and Mirae Scientists street of the early 2010s at the initial phase of Kim Jong-un regime to more recently, Samjiyon city have led residents living in the underdeveloped region to harbor a sense of being marginalized and excluded.

Interestingly, although the uneven development between urban and rural areas has aggravated, new rural theses does not address the role of the city and also omit the wording "city" as opposed to Kim Il-sung's frequent mentioning of "city" as a more developed region compared to farming villages. Hence, new rural theses must have put more weight on the urbanization of rural areas, unlike Kim Jong-un's 1994 paper. It, therefore, makes logical sense to assume that Kim Jong-un may have intentionally excluded the wording that reminds people of the uneven development and that the North Korean authorities are pretty sensitive to the uneven development issues between urban and rural areas.

Despite such observations, it bears limits to figure out whether North Korea has policy will to turn rural areas into the second and third "socialist ideal village" similar to Samjiyon city. It also remains to be seen whether North Korea is concerned about

the uneven development only by examining the texts contained in new rural theses. One can only sneak a peek into rural dwellers' recognition of uneven development between urban and rural areas and the intention behind the development of Kumduck by analyzing the article reporting on the impending completion of the construction of Kumduck in remote villages of South Hamgyong Province in Rodong Sinmun published on January 1, 2022 (with a cover story of the 4th Plenary Meeting and the new rural theses).

Development of Kumduck: 'Following Samjiyon' as Rural-based Urban Ideology

A photo reporting on the city's construction in rural villages looks quite familiar, as can be seen in <Figure 1>. It is because people have witnessed the development process of Samjiyon city, an exemplary city for Kumduck to follow before its own development. However, there exists a contextual difference between Samjiyon city's following of Pyongyang¹⁷⁾ and Kumduck's following of Samjiyon city. While Pyongyang, capital of North Korea, and Samjiyon city, a revolutionary stronghold symbolizing a Paektu lineage of North Korea's supreme leaders, are exceptional places, Kumduck had been a very remote village that no central media paid attention to up until a few years ago. What does it mean for such an ordinary place to be turned into a special place like Pyongyang and Samjiyon? A clue to this question can be found in the remarks of residents living in Kumduck below.

17) "Kim Jong-un, "Turning Samjiyon into a City like Pyongyang"," *JoongAng Ilbo*, 2016.12.28.

<Figure 1> Kumduck in the Leading-up to the Completion of Construction Covered in *Rodong Sinmun*



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, page 8, January 1, 2022.

One resident in Kumduck remarked, “I was astounded by and envied of the improved living standard brought by the development of Samjiyon city unfolding before my eyes through the TV screen. That amazement has miraculously come to me. (...) Wonderfully-looking new housing had been built, the scale of which is tantamount to cities (...).” Such a remark reflects people’s recognition of rural underdevelopment, which affirms the longing for developed cities, such as Samjiyon city, and a reflection of such yearning in their own housing (“wonderfully looking new housing”).

As the article describes Kumduck as yet “another national example of a mountainous city, mining city (...) in local construction followed by Samjiyon city,” North Korean authorities have disseminated rural-based city ideology such as ‘following Pyongyang’ and ‘following Samjiyon’ to rural residents, which leads to ‘Samjiyon following Pyongyang’ and ‘Kumduck following Samjiyon.’ Such dissemination of ideology can help residents living in underdeveloped areas hold hopes that their regions could develop into advanced areas, such as Pyongyang, Samjiyon, and Kumduck, in the near future. It could also contribute to alleviating political complaints amidst the continued sanctions and COVID-19, which are feared the most by the North Korean authorities. At the same time, it could help rural areas

stably maintain the function of agricultural villages as a ‘robust base for food and resources’ for the urban population, which has been stressed since the Kim Il-sung era. Until urbanization is completed in non-urban areas, this new ideology will remain valid, ultimately contributing to the stabilization of the regime.

Prospect: The Emergence of Urbanism that Goes beyond the Dichotomy of Socialism vs. Capitalism?

Kim Il-sung asserted in his rural theses, “the ideology that neglects rural areas is a capitalist ideology: the capitalist ideology dictates that cities exploit rural areas and that rural areas are viewed as backward compared to urban areas.”¹⁸⁾ He assessed the urbanization process through the lens of the ideological dichotomy of socialism vs. capitalism. The first introductory sentence of Kim Il-sung’s rural theses starts with “the founders of Marxism-Leninism gave significant meaning to issues facing farmers and agricultural sector and deeply interested in resolving such issues.”¹⁹⁾ This sentence is indicative of the point that socialism, unlike capitalism, gives importance to rural areas. However, Lenin’s theory and practice, which initiated the Russian revolution, was focused on urban space and the working class. Mao Zedong adopted a ‘strategy to win over cities through rural villages,’ which defines rural areas as a revolutionary base and blockades cities given that Russia’s case is unfit for China’s situation. In that regard, Russia, China, and North Korea recognize rural issues differently even though they adopted the same socialist ideology.

What is worthy of attention here is not a dogmatic explanation of whether socialism considered rural areas a revolutionary space. The importance lies in recognizing that the dichotomous approach of socialism vs. capitalism has its limits in understanding North Korea’s rural and urban areas and that “cement”-based urbanism²⁰⁾ that does not fit any definition of two ideologies has incrementally

18) Kim Il-sung, “Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country,” p. 9.

19) *op. cit.*, p. 1.

20) The importance of cement production was mentioned in the new rural theses. In the Korean

affected North Korean society.

At the initial phase of the Kim Jong-un regime, Pyongyang's city spaces were reorganized and reconstructed, such as Yeomyeong street and Mirae Scientists Street. Urban ideology, formulated in this process, was also reflected and applied to the construction of other cities, such as Sinuiju and Wonsan. Rural theses announced in celebration of the 10th anniversary of Kim Jong-un's rule signal that urban fabrics came to surface in North Korea, which can hardly be explained by an outdated dichotomy of socialism vs. capitalism. New recognition and approach are needed to make a diagnosis and projection on such changes. ©KINU 2022

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Central News Agency (KCNA) on January 6, an article was reported titled "explosion occurred in many mines and cement factories," again highlighting the importance of cement.