

The Political Philosophy of Juche

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Introduction

The political philosophy known as *juche* became the official autarkic state ideology of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1972.¹ Although foreign scholars often describe *juche* as "self-reliance," the true meaning of the term is much more nuanced. Kim Il Sung explained:

Establishing *juche* means, in a nutshell, being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one's own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one's own brains, believing in one's own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance, and thus solving one's own problems for oneself on one's own responsibility under all circumstances.

The DPRK claims that *juche* is Kim Il Sung's creative application of Marxist-Leninist principles to the modern political realities in North Korea.² Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il have successfully wielded the *juche* idea as a political shibboleth to evoke a fiercely nationalistic drive for North Korean independence and to justify policies of self-reliance and self-denial in the face of famine and economic stagnation in North Korea. Kim Il Sung envisioned three specific applications of *juche* philosophy: political and ideological independence, especially from the Soviet Union and China; economic self-reliance

and self-sufficiency; and a viable national defense system.³

This paper begins with a discussion of the three key components of the *juche* ideology – political, economic and military independence – as promulgated by the DPRK. The second section is a discussion of the ideological origins of the *juche* philosophy, followed by a third section on the philosophical bases of the *juche* idea. The paper concludes with an examination of *juche* as a political body of thought and an evaluation of the success with which *juche* policies have responded to the political and economic realities of North Korea.

Key Components of the Juche Ideology

The governing principles of *juche* were clearly expressed by Kim Il Sung in a speech entitled "Let Us Defend the Revolutionary Spirit of Independence, Self-Reliance, and Self-defense More Thoroughly in All Fields of State Activities," which he delivered to the Supreme People's Assembly on December 16, 1967.⁴ In it, he declared that

...the Government of the Republic will implement with all consistency the line of independence, self-sustenance, and self-defense to consolidate the political independence of the country (*chaju*), build up more solidly the foundations of an independent national economy capable of insuring the complete unification, independence, and prosperity of our nation (*charip*) and

¹ Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 401.

² Yuk-Sa Li, ed. *Juche! The Speeches and Writings of Kim Il Sung* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), 157.

³ Tai Sung An, *North Korea in Transition: From Dictatorship to Dynasty* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, c1983), 58-9.

⁴ Li, *Juche*, 149-206.

increasing the country's defense capabilities, so as to safeguard the security of the fatherland reliably by our own force (*chawi*), by splendidly embodying our Party's idea of *juche* in all fields.⁵

Chaju: *Domestic and Foreign Independence*

The principle of political independence is one of the central tenets of *juche* ideology. With respect to international relations, the principles of *juche* stress complete equality and mutual respect among nations. Furthermore, *juche* ideology asserts that every state has the right of self-determination in order to secure the happiness and prosperity of its people as it best sees fit. These political tenets – equal sovereignty and non-intervention – would satisfy the fierce desire for respect and security of a small and weak nation-state such as North Korea.

In practice, this political stance has caused North Korea to truly become a hermit kingdom because of the huge stigma *juche* places upon cooperation with outside powers. According to *juche* as interpreted by the DPRK, yielding to foreign pressure or tolerating foreign intervention would make it impossible to maintain *chaju*, or the defense of national independence and sovereignty. This in turn would threaten the nation's ability to defend the interests of the people, since political independence is seen as being absolutely critical for economic self-sustenance and military self-defense. Kim Jong Il predicted that dependence on foreign powers would lead to the failure of the socialist revolution in Korea.^{6, 7}

Among countries that he considered socialist peers, such as China, the USSR, Cuba and several African countries, Kim Il Sung urged cooperation and stressed the need for mutual support and limited dependence. However, while acknowledging that it was important to learn from the examples of other socialist countries, Kim Il

Sung was highly sensitive to the problems of flunkeyism towards Moscow and Beijing and the inevitable Marxist-Leninist dogmatism that he abhorred during his guerrilla days. In constructing the socialist revolution in North Korea, he warned that the North Koreans must "...resolutely repudiate the tendency to swallow things of others undigested or imitate them mechanically."⁸ Furthermore, he claimed that his regime's "success" was credited to the independent manner in which all problems were solved, conforming Marxist-Leninist principles to the specific conditions of North Korea without altering their fundamental substance.

Domestically, Kim asserted that it was imperative to build internal political forces to ensure *chaju*. The pivotal factor in the success of achieving *chaju* would be the extent to which the people rallied around the party and the leader Kim Il Sung, and later Kim Jong Il himself. This insistence on internal unity of support, stemming perhaps from the elder Kim's disgust with internal factionalism before the Korean War, conveniently helped to justify his consolidation of personal power.

Charip: *Economic Independence*

An independent and self-sufficient national economy is necessary both in order to secure political integrity and to achieve national prosperity. *Charip* – economic independence – is seen as the material basis for *chaju*, or political independence. Kim Il Sung feared that economic dependence on foreign aid would render the state a political satellite of other countries. He believed that it would be impossible to successfully build a socialist republic without the material and technical foundations that would come from an independent national economy. This economy would consist of a powerful base of heavy industry with the machine-building industry at its core, which would equip light industry, agriculture, transport, and all other branches of the economy.⁹

⁵ Li, *Juche*, 156.

⁶ Li, *Juche*, 157-8.

⁷ Jong Il Kim, *Accomplishing Juche Revolutionary Cause* (Pyongyang, D.P.R.K.: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1990), 47.

⁸ Li, *Juche*, 159.

⁹ Li, *Juche*, 160.

According to Kim Jong Il,

building an independent national economy means building an economy which is free from dependence on others and which stands on its own feet, an economy which serves one's own people and develops on the strength of the resources of one's own country and by the efforts of one's people.¹⁰

Independent food production was seen as being of particular significance because successful farming would provide the people with stabilized living conditions and means to independently support themselves. Just as important to the survival and independence of the national economy was the establishment of reliable and independent sources of raw materials and fuel. Extensive modernization of the economy and training for technically-minded cadres were considered indispensable for the construction of an independent national economy as well.

Kim Il Sung was careful to maintain that building an independent national economy on *juche* principles of self-reliance was not synonymous with building an isolated economy. Looking at the size of American aid to South Korea, which equaled its fledgling economy's gross domestic product during the immediate post-war years, Kim Il Sung recognized that North Korea would not be able to survive without significant aid from its communist sponsors. Thus, he encouraged close economic and technical cooperation between socialist countries and newly-emerging nations as an aid in economic development and ideological unity.¹¹

Chawi: *Military Independence*

The last area of independence is self-reliance in defense, a characteristic fundamental in *juche* philosophy to an independent sovereign state. The North Korean attitude towards military confrontation was summed up in this manner by

Kim Il Sung: "We do not want war, nor are we afraid of it, nor do we beg peace from the imperialists."¹² The decidedly belligerent policy of countering any perceived "imperialist moves of aggression and war" with violence was seen as the best way to defend national independence and to win the revolutionary cause.¹³ The implementation of this self-reliant defense system would involve the mobilization of the whole country and the complete inculcation of ideology in the armed forces. Those who were not directly taking up arms were to contribute to the construction and maintenance of the domestic defense industry and remain ideologically prepared, so that the home front would be united in a sense of socio-political superiority.¹⁴

Although Kim Il Sung conceded that foreign support played a secondary role in the holistic war against foreign "imperialists" and "aggressors," he heavily emphasized that the decisive factor would be the preparation of internal domestic purposes.¹⁵ Thus he pledged the government to prepare the Korean people and the army thoroughly and ideologically to cope with war and to make full material preparations to defend the country by relying on an independent national economy.¹⁶

Origins of the *Juche* Philosophy

There are three major schools of thought regarding the origins of the *juche* ideology. The first of these is the instrumental perspective, which emphasizes domestic and international relations factors. The second perspective focuses on the influence of traditional Korean politics. The last viewpoint considers *juche* to be original political thought stemming directly from the life experiences of Kim Il Sung.

Instrumental Perspective

The instrumentalist viewpoint focuses on both domestic and foreign political factors as the root of the *juche* ideology. Some scholars believe

¹⁰ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 48.

¹¹ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 48-52.

¹² Kim, *Accomplishing*, 53.

¹³ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 53.

¹⁴ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 52-5.

¹⁵ Li, *Juche*, 162.

¹⁶ Li, *Juche*, 163.

Korea that Kim's unstable power during and immediately following the Korean War caused him to deploy ideological purges in order to consolidate his political position, using the *juche* principle of national solidarity as a domestic instrument of personal cult-building.¹⁷ To this end, Kim Il Sung forbade any other ideology from being discussed or taught in North Korea. Since the content and application of the *juche* ideology were very ambiguous until the late 1960s, Kim Il Sung was the only one who could successfully wield and implement the philosophy. Thus, implementing and executing policies based on *juche* effectively consolidated Kim Il Sung's absolute political power and indirectly provided ideological justification for his dictatorship in North Korea.¹⁸

Perhaps more saliently, *juche* as the guiding principle of foreign policy was utilized as a means of balancing power between the Soviet Union and China, and as a means to curb the Soviet and Chinese influence in the country. Kim's wariness of Sino-Soviet involvement in North Korean domestic affairs was exacerbated by his personal dislike of the Soviets and the country's national inferiority complex towards major powers. Kim became uneasy about the Soviet Union's gradual movement towards peaceful coexistence with the United States in the 1960s. However, because of the economic and military aid Pyongyang was receiving from Moscow, as well as Kim's professed value for unity in the Marxism-Leninism struggle against imperialism, North Korea continued to support Soviet positions on most issues. Gradually, North Korea began to use the *juche* tenet of foreign non-intervention and national self-determination as an ideological excuse for cordoning off its governance from Moscow and Beijing. Eventually, North Korea repudiated both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China as a socialist imperialist state, accusing its leaders of abandoning pure

Marxism-Leninism principles to pursue capitalist gains.¹⁹

Traditional Political Culture

The second perspective is more long-term and focuses on the influence of traditional political culture in Korea. The scholars in this second camp argue that *juche* is a reflection of a centuries-old tradition of independence from foreign powers. Strategically located at a peninsular tip of the East Asian continent, Korea has long been a pawn of contention between its two powerful neighbors, China and Japan. From the earliest recorded history, the Korean people have fought fiercely to maintain their independence in the face of multiple invasions by Mongols, Manchurians, Han Chinese and Japanese pirates and samurais. The sum total of these invasions may qualify Korea as the most oft-invaded territory in the world. Under the Yi Dynasty, which ruled Korea from 1392 until the Japanese annexation in 1910, Korea became a highly defensive state with a foreign policy of isolation towards the outside world. When Kim Il Sung came to power in North Korea in 1945, he arguably reverted to the highly isolationist policies of pre-modern Korea.

Furthermore, this viewpoint encompasses the exposition of *juche* as a brand of Korean Leninist nationalism, a "creative adoption of Marxism-Leninism" peculiarly suited to the Korean situation, described by Kim Jong Il as

a difficult and complex revolution which had to deal with the tasks of the anti-imperialist, national-liberation revolution, with formidable Japanese imperialism as the target, and those of the anti-feudal, democratic revolution simultaneously.²⁰

Baek Nam Un, a Korean sociologist who later aided Kim Il Sung, said that the situation in Korea requires an independent and creative

¹⁷ Dae-Ho Byun, *North Korea's Foreign Policy* (Seoul, R.O.K.: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1991), 55-6, 60.

¹⁸ Byun, *North*, 71-2.

¹⁹ Byun, *North*, 62-76.

²⁰ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 18.

adoption of Marxism and Leninism, and a peculiar synthesis of nationalism and socialism. Kim Il Sung himself said:

To establish *juche* is a question of special importance for us in the light of our country's geographical situation and environments, of the peculiarities of its historical development, and the complex and arduous nature of our revolution.²¹

Individualism: Kim Il Sung's Original Thought

The third viewpoint is the North Koreans' view of *juche* as a prime example of their late Supreme Leader's brilliance and originality. This last group insists that *juche* was the intellectual result of Kim Il Sung's highly exaggerated and romanticized personal experience as a guerrilla fighting against the Japanese in the 1930s. This immediate attribution of *juche* to Kim Il Sung's personal history is emphasized by his son and heir Kim Jong Il in his book *On the Juche Idea*. He argues that his father "put forward a *juche*-oriented line for the Korean revolution" and that "...this was a historical event which heralded the creation of the *juche* idea and the birth of the *juche*-oriented revolutionary line."²² Kim Il Sung himself had at times maintained that the *juche* ideology grew out of two major frustrations he felt with the Korean revolution during the anti-Japanese struggle: first, the revolutionary vanguard had lost contact with the proletarian masses and were waging a theoretical battle without mass support; and second, that "flunkeyism" – seeking Moscow's favor – and factionalism were corrupting the revolution from the inside.²³

Philosophical Underpinnings of *Juche* Ideology

The *juche* idea is a *Weltanschauung*, or world view, that affirms the penultimate value of man's interests. According to *juche* ideology, man has ultimate control over the world and of his own destiny because he alone has *chajusong*, or creativity and consciousness. Adherents to the *juche* philosophy claim that this viewpoint of man as dominating and reshaping the world is a unique contribution of *juche* ideology to the body of philosophical knowledge. Despite this claim to originality, there is nothing particularly revolutionary or novel in the tenets of the *juche* philosophy. Kim Il Sung's policy stances on subjects such as the class struggle, the idea of the mass line, the role of the single great leader in history and the importance of belief in one's own capabilities were all drawn primarily from Chinese and Eastern European thought. Kim Il Sung's genius lay in his ability to fuse these elements together to capitalize on the North Korean drive for independence.

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Debt to Maoist Thought

Kim's early knowledge of communism came from the Chinese communist guerrilla army with which he trained from 1935 to 1941. During this time, he was tutored and influenced by Wei Zhengmin, a superior Chinese political officer in his guerrilla group. While Kim never acknowledged the extent of his subordination to and affiliation with the Chinese Communist Party, many scholars contend that Kim was a member of the CCP.²⁴ By the end of the Korean War, Chinese influence in North Korea had overtaken that of the Soviet Union. Kim closely followed

²¹ Li, *Juche*, 157.

²² Kim, *Accomplishing*, 19.

²³ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 18.

²⁴ Byun, *North*, 62-3.

Mao Zedong's political thought and action, which heavily influenced the development of the DPRK's political institutions in the late 1940s and 1950s.

One example of this emulation was the North Korean strategy of *Chollima Undong*, which was inspired by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward movement of 1958-1960.²⁵ The multi-year economic plans, stress upon rural self-sufficiency and nationalistic and revolutionary fervor that inspired the Great Leap Forward are all characteristics of the *juche* ideology of economic self-sufficiency. Kim's assertion that

...if one lacks the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance, one will lose faith in one's own strength, fail to try to tap the inner resources of one's country, grow indolent and loose, and fall into passivism [sic] and conservatism

is highly reminiscent of the Yan' an era of the CCP, during which a belief in the power of the will to overcome seemingly impossible barriers was permanently embedded into Maoist thought.^{26; 27}

The underlying principle of the *juche* ideology is the faithful application of Marxism-Leninism in a case-specific manner that would best suit the history, political conditions and current realities of the country. This theory of different means to the penultimate goal of communism was first stressed by Mao Zedong, especially during the rectification campaign of 1942-44 on the need to "sinify" Marxism-Leninism and halt the mechanical and dogmatic acceptance of the Soviet model as the "universal truth."^{28; 29} Thus, the main tenet of Kim Il Sung's thought can be directly attributed and traced to Mao.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, Kim Il Sung was never willing to publicly acknowledge his ideological debt to Mao, especially after the institutionalization of the *juche* ideology as North

Korea's sole political philosophy by the DPRK in the early 1960s. Following this formal linkage of the *juche* ideology with North Korean nationalism, the inferiority implications of acknowledging such a great debt to a foreign leader was probably insurmountable both for the consistency of the independent *juche* ideology and for Kim's personal pride.³⁰

Korean and Confucian Roots

The *juche* ideology that is trumpeted by North Korea as Kim Il Sung's ingenious and original contribution to the body of political philosophy is really drawn from a centuries-old tradition of Korean political thought. Kim himself has acknowledged that he drew the term and idea of *juche* from Korean scholars in the early twentieth century, who in turn drew inspiration from Confucian ideas dating back to the original state philosophy of independence espoused by Korean rulers. The tradition of strong nationalism among the Korean people coexisted with another tradition called *sadaechuii*, in which the Confucian palace officials and educated elite groups jockeyed for foreign support through sycophancy.³¹ Kim's *juche* ideology may represent his reaction to the slave mentality of *sadaechuii* as well as an indebtedness to the original nationalistic strain of Korean political culture. Aside from its tremendous appeal to the deep traditional Korean antipathy towards foreign influence, *juche* serves to intensify the nationalism of the North Korean people, who are told that world civilization originated from the Korean peninsula.³²

Application to Society

Indoctrination in *juche* ideology was seen as the primary concern in the revolutionary struggle for *chajusong* and the subsequent construction of a socialist republic.³³ Establishing a *juche* mindset meant the promotion of the attitude that the

²⁵ An, *North*, 62-3.

²⁶ Li, *Juche*, 160.

²⁷ Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1995), 48-52.

²⁸ An, *North*, 62.

²⁹ Byun, *North*, 68-9.

³⁰ An, *North*, 63.

³¹ An, *North*, 35-6.

³² Oberdorfer, *Two*, 19.

³³ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 37.

Korean people could solve all of their problems by their own talents and initiative. Cultivating a sense of national dignity and revolutionary pride was especially important, as evidenced by the great lengths to which cultural aspects of North Korean life such as music and entertainment were monopolized and dictated by the Party under Kim Jong Il, Kim Il Sung's son and successor.³⁴

The Kim Il Sung regime instructed the North Korean people in the *juche* ideology using an analogy drawn from human anatomy. The Great Leader is the brain that makes decisions and issues orders, the Party is the nervous system that channels information, and the people are the bone and muscle that physically execute the orders.³⁵ This belief system, inculcated in North Koreans since early childhood, made them docile and loyal to Kim Il Sung even in the face of famines and energy crises that have devastated the country.

The *juche* ideology was widely supported among the North Korean populace because of the doctrine that the success of the socialist revolution depends upon the extent to which the masses rally around and support the leadership. When Kim Il Sung unilaterally declared *juche* to be the governing principle of all aspects of North Korean life, as well as the ideological basis of all state policies, the philosophy gained the full authority of Kim Il Sung's godlike status. Having established the infallibility of the *juche* philosophy and consolidated their own political power, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were able to use *juche* principles of self-sustenance and political and military independence as justification for policies such as the routing of a huge percentage of national income towards military

expenditures, despite the famine sweeping through the populace. Due to the power and influence of one man, the Great Leader, the *juche* philosophy became inextricably embedded in the economic, political, military and cultural aspects of life in the DPRK.

Conclusion

Despite the repeated and strong emphasis on *juche*'s loyalty to the principles of Marxism-Leninism, *juche* as philosophical thought does not strictly adhere to Marxist-Leninist principles as North Korea purports. First, the fundamental tenets of *juche* – that man is the master of all things and decides everything, and that an ideological consciousness determines human behavior in historical development – contradict Karl Marx's proposition of economic determinism. Marx believed that individual figures had no control over the general trend of predetermined human development, and he did not give man an exalted position in the hierarchy of historical factors of importance. Kim Il Sung, in contrast, saw himself as an absolutely essential figure in the struggle of the working masses against the oppressive middle class.^{36; 37}

Juche also diverges from Lenin's focus on the educating and organizing functions of the elite revolutionary vanguard. Authoritarianism is inherent in the *juche* ideology because the guidance of an "exceptionally brilliant and outstanding leader" is considered essential to the mobilization of the masses of the working class.³⁸ Unlike Lenin, Kim Il Sung's regime advocated a single leader-headed revolutionary hierarchy rather than a core of outstanding and committed leaders to lead the revolutionary struggle.³⁹

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³⁴ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 20-3, 42-4.

³⁵ Oberdorfer, *Two*, 20.

³⁶ Kim, *Accomplishing*, 28.

³⁷ Byun, *North*, 87-8.

³⁸ An, *North*, 57-63.

³⁹ An, *North*, 61-2.

North Korea's preoccupation with independence and its isolationism have engaged the country in a dangerous game of brinkmanship with the United States. Over the years, this has led to near-catastrophic military tension with the United States and with South Korea, especially along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which is already the most heavily armed land zone in the world. The DPRK has taken a particularly hard-line stance on the issue of peninsular reunification. Kim Il Sung declared that any cooperation with foreign attempts to mediate or interfere would be unthinkable because it would effectively place the destiny of Korea in the hands of foreigners, directly contrary to the *juche* principle of national self-determination.⁴⁰

In economic and military affairs, North Korea is far from the independence and self-sufficiency to which it aspires. The country is in the throes of famine and is plagued by a chronic energy crisis. Far from relying on its own energy sources and agricultural production, the DPRK has been reduced to a recipient of food aid from South Korea, the United States and other countries in the international community it had previously disdained as "imperialist aggressors." Despite the huge portion of its shrinking GDP that goes to military spending, Pyongyang is still dependent on Moscow and Beijing for weaponry and technology.

Domestically, the *juche* idea has been used to legitimize Kim Il Sung's Koreanization of "Marxism-Leninism" and the consolidation of the Stalinist system under Kim Il Sung's personal power in North Korea. Furthermore, the *juche* idea has helped to shore up North Korean national pride in the face of politico-economic competition with South Korea. Kim Il Sung used the *juche* ideology and its emphasis on the supreme importance of man and its message of self-sufficiency to stir up nationalism and revolutionary energy in the North Korean people.

Internationally, Kim Il Sung used the *juche* ideology as a justification for the elimination of the influence of the USSR and the PRC. Political independence from its bigger neighbors has always been a quest of key importance in Korean history. Kim Il Sung understood that as long as North Korea avoided siding either with the Soviet Union or China unilaterally, North Korea could remain relatively autonomous in its domestic and foreign policy; this careful balancing act of neutrality was expressed in the form of the *juche* ideology.

North Korea marks the last frontier of isolationism in the world today. Because its policies and behavior may be explained by the state ideology of *juche*, an understanding of the origins, components and philosophical underpinnings of the *juche* ideology is essential to an understanding of the North Korean state and its people.

⁴⁰ Li, *Juche*, 159.