

Democratic capitalism and juche: common values and challenges

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**I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.**
William Ernest Henley, 1875

North and South Korea are two countries that shared the same 5000-year history up until this last century. From its partition in 1945 to the present, the two countries have essentially taken divergent paths politically, ideologically, economically and socially. The ideological dichotomy occurring in the two countries because of the installation of communism in the North and democratic capitalism in the South would seem to indicate that each country operates with a different set of values as dictated by their respective ideologies. These value differences cause great difficulty for North Korean defectors trying to adapt to life in South Korea and would no doubt clash on the path to reunification. However, with the development of North Korea's unique Juche ideology and its man-centered philosophical foundation, a strict sense of self-reliance and self-determination was implanted in the minds of the North Korean people. The values expressed in the Juche idea have remarkable similarities to those values that are most often associated with democratic capitalism. Although Juche is often viewed as a controlling dogma with very little use in a democratic capitalist system, this paper will illustrate common values between it and democratic capitalism. Juche should not be discarded completely, as it will actually have value in bridging some of the ideological gaps existing between the two states. Also examined are the differences in the two value systems that pose challenges to compatibility. Juche is implemented at the macro-level of the nation and the masses and is not applied at the micro-level of the individual. This paper will suggest that, through an operational shift, Juche values can also be applied to the individual as a means of helping defectors who are struggling with the individualistic values found in South Korea's democratic capitalist system. Drawing connections between the apparently opposing ideologies will also serve to fill in ideological gaps as the two Koreas explore possibilities for reunification. It should also be noted that when references to reunification are made there is the assumption that the democratic capitalist system in the South is preferable to the communist system of the North. Therefore, 'reunification' here implies the adoption of democratic capitalism as the dominant system of a reunified Korea.

The Power of Juche in North Korea

Ideology is powerful. It serves to unite and divide people, which is certainly illustrated by the Korean case. Ideology is a set of ideas and beliefs by which a group understands and makes sense of the world. Ideology should provide an explanation of how things have come to be as they currently are and, with a guide to action, indicate where things are going. There should be criteria for distinguishing truth from falsehood, valid arguments from invalid as well as a principle belief

whether in God, Providence, or History to which the adherents can make their final appeal if challenged by outside forces. (McLean 1996: 233). Through ideology, adherents are able to structure views with respect to their interpretation and moral attitude about society, history, and human beings and it is through this perspective that believers see and evaluate the existing and desired world(Yoo 1996: 37). Thus, ideology can be seen as a means by which an adherent's world view is framed and it is through this ideological construct that a believer interprets and filters experience. The power of ideology in North Korea is no exception.

Many dismiss Juche as simply a controlling mechanism by which the North Korean leadership maintains legitimacy and demands strict obedience from the people. It is often viewed, it seems, as a kind of fragile and hollow ideological shell with little value that would crush in on itself if the North Korean regime collapsed or suffered the loss of its 'dear' leader. While one cannot ignore that Juche is indeed a means of controlling the North Korean people, maintaining legitimacy of the leadership, or propagating an almost xenophobic form of Korean nationalism, there is much more to consider when assessing the extent of Juche's impact on the psyche of the North Korean people.

Juche is the eye of the storm around which every action, thought, and plan in North Korea takes place. As the supposed creation of Kim Il sung himself, it has taken on defining roles in virtually every aspect of North Korean life(Yoo 1996:29). Kim's son and current leader Kim Jong il is the legitimate interpreter of Juche method and its implementation in all areas of state function. Juche is often translated, however inadequately, as '*self-reliance*' or '*self-determination*' and can be seen as a response to Korea's history of domination and protection by stronger powers. Dae-Sook Suh has pointed out that the political socialization process to indoctrinate the North Korean people with Juche seems to have been so intense that the self-reliant attitude toward each other and the outside world has become a part of the culture. The people seem to have gained inner strength to confront hardship and find solutions independently. The North Korean people might have to endure economic hardships, indigence, and isolation from the technologically advanced and industrialized nations, but without hesitation, they will reject any attempt to compromise their independence. They will not tolerate the stationing of foreign troops on their land or become subservient to outsiders in order to solve economic difficulties(2000: 44).

It is not surprising that Juche is such a pervasive part of North Korean life and thinking when one realizes the extent to which citizens are required to study and even memorize authoritative teachings and messages. Officially, North Koreans are on a daily schedule to work for eight hours, study messages sent by the authorities for eight hours and sleep for eight hours(Kim H. J. 1998:22). Although this regiment may not be strictly followed by the average citizen, there is still a daily requirement for children and adults to have political study sessions in which Kim's works are read and discussed. Such study sessions begin at the kindergarten level and continue throughout the rest of one's life. Gauging the effectiveness of North Korean propaganda efforts is not easy, but almost all defectors indicate the overall effect of such indoctrination is powerful, especially given there are no other channels of information available(Oh & Hassig 2000: 140-142). Therefore, it is important to understand that as North Korean's confront an environment of democratic capitalism they are likely to interpret their experiences-consciously or unconsciously- through

Juche ideas, so it is important to establish where connections exist. This will aid the assimilation process as North Korean citizens use the Juche concepts, already firmly inculcated in their consciousness, to navigate new ideological waters.

Democratic Capitalism and Juche: Common Values

Before examining Juche's development and its connections to democratic capitalism, one needs to establish what values are meant by '*democratic capitalism*.' While an in-depth study of the history and development of democratic capitalist values is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important, for the sake of comparison, to touch on the principle philosophical foundations that form such values. As this is done, both the democratic political system and the capitalist economic system will be juxtaposed to imply one complete ideological system as Juche involves both politics and economics. In addition, it has been noted by Robert Dahl that all countries with democratic systems have had capitalist economies and Peter Berger indicated that capitalism is a necessary -though not sufficient- condition for democracy(qtd. in Rhee 1999:151/155).

Although there are many different forms and theories of democratic capitalism, people relate to the consciousness of ideology and not theoretical distinctions. The consciousness of democracy is best described with such words as freedom, independence, self-determination, and self-reliance. Qualities like ingenuity and creativity in solving problems are valued. The importance of the individual is stressed and the idea of not depending on others is implicit. It embodies the notion that one has to forge one's own destiny, despite that which might stand in the way or seek to thwart self-determination. One of the fathers of democratic thought, John Locke, noted in his "The Second Treatise of Civil Government" that man is the master of himself, "and the proprietor of his own person and the actions or labour of it..." (qtd. in Paek 2000: 91). Self government or the taking charge of one's self illustrate essential democratic values(Rhee 1999: 105). These values apply both at the macro-level of the nation and at the micro-level of the individual. Even in an Asian country like South Korea, where society is largely influenced by collective Confucian values, the democratic capitalist values of the individual, self-determination, self-reliance, and independence have permeated the consciousness of its citizens.

As already mentioned, the word Juche is often translated as '*self-reliance*' or '*self-determination*.' When the word is dissected and broken into its two Chinese characters, one sees that the first character **Ju** means '*owner*', '*master*' or '*lord*' and the second character **che** indicates '*the body*', '*the whole*' or '*the substance*.' In essence, it hints at the idea of being the owner or master of your own body. The character **che** is also part of the word Chejae that means '*system*', '*organization*', or '*structure*.' Thus, Juche can be viewed as the idea of being in charge of one's own self or the system that one is a part of. With this understanding, it is easy to see, in light of Korea's history of being dominated by other powers, why the concept of Juche became the ideological mantra for North Korea under the leadership of Kim Il Sung.

The historical origins of Juche extend from Korea's colonial experience under the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945. Particularly in its later years during the 1930's and the early 1940's, the first inklings of Juche began to emerge (Belke

1999:168). Also deeply rooted in the experience of the North Korean people, Juche is a reaction to the past political subjugation, economic dependence, and need for military assistance from China and the former Soviet Union. Juche's modern origins emerge from the Korean War as an anti-Soviet sentiment resulting from the Soviet Union's failure to assist the North in "liberating" the southern half of the peninsula(Suh 2000:38). North Korea soon established an independent stance from the Soviet Union and began focusing on constructing a unique Korean revolution.

In his first speech alluding to the Juche idea on December 28, 1955, North Korean leader Kim Il sung began to set the tone for Korea's need to develop its own revolution independent of those in other socialist countries. Kim states:

Devotion to the Korean revolution is Juche in the ideological work of our Party. Therefore, all ideological work must be subordinated to the interests of the Korean revolution. When we study the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the history of the Chinese revolution, of the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism, it is entirely for the purpose of correctly carrying out our own revolution(Kim 1975:150).

Kim would continue to emphasize an independent stance for North Korea and its revolution. Juche was then used as an effective instrument for engendering nationalism that served as a basis for regime legitimacy in establishing North Korea's superiority over South Korea and in the further promotion of anti-foreign ideas(Park 1998:35-36). During this stage of its development, Kim Il sung begins to give a more formulated explanation of Juche. Juche takes on three of its most important characteristics which are **chaju**(independence) in political work, **charip**(self-sustaining) in economic endeavors and **chawi**(self-defense) in military affairs. Kim Il sung explains that only when a country exercises its legitimate right to political self-determination, can the country's complete independence be guaranteed. Economic self-support serves as a material basis for political independence. If a country depends on others economically then it will also be dependent on them politically. National self-defense is a military guarantee for the country's political independence and economic self-support(Kim 1975:395-398). These three important characteristics of Juche were further emphasized to ensure that the country as a nation would be in complete control of its destiny. Juche would more and more become a 'We must do it ourselves' philosophy to prevent once again the slipping into flunkeyism or coming under control of foreign powers with imperialist intentions. It would advocate that in order to ensure the freedom and prosperity of its people, every state must have the right to chart out and determine its future(Suh 1988: 303).

Juche became North Korea's clarion call to build a truly independent and self-determined nation as these values would be the cornerstone of the ideology. Juche is applied to the nation as a compass to determine the country's own direction and future. With the important national elements of Chaju or independence, self-sustaining economy, and self-defense, Juche makes its first connection to the values of democratic capitalism, self-reliance and independence. The values of self-reliance and independence imply that one is free to make choices that are deemed best. Although Juche takes the idea to an extreme level, early democratic revolutions were also calls for a nation to become self-determining and independent for the benefit of its citizen's prosperity and freedom. A country should not be dependent on other

nations for development or direction. It is at the level of the nation that Juche's self-reliance is actually applied with some persistence, which seems to have resulted in its current international isolation. Juche then, like democratic capitalism, calls on a nation to chart its own course and determine its destiny. Juche would then address the role and function of man in the revolutionary construction of a truly self-reliant and independent nation.

Taking its next step, Juche began to evolve into a world view or 'weltanschauung' with human-centered philosophical notions at its foundation(Park 1998:38). In this stage of Juche's development, definition is given to what comprises a human being. Juche states that man is the master of everything and determines everything. Juche is presented as an original idea which gives a correct view of the world and shows people how to carve out their own destiny(Exposition of the Juche Idea 1983:16). The social attributes that man develops historically and socially are **Chajusong** or 'independence', **creativity**, and **consciousness**. Chajusong is man's desire to live independently as the master of the world and his own destiny. Creativity is the attribute of man transforming the world and shaping his destiny purposefully. Consciousness is the quality of a man who determines all his activities designed to understand and reshape the world and himself (Kim J.I. 1985:5).

Kim Il sung and his son Kim Jong il would continue to emphasize the importance of the Juche idea and its definition of man as the master of the world. Man is seen as the most developed material being who has the ability to control and manipulate the environment to serve him where as all other creatures are subordinate and must adapt to the objective world. Therefore, man is able to transform the world and change it according to his own will(Kim J.I. 1985: 20-21). This transformation of the world translates into constructing the revolution. The revolution should be carried out with conviction and with the responsibility of the masses. Any problems arising in the revolution should be solved in an independent and creative way(Exposition of The Juche Idea 1983: 8). This purely Korean construction of the revolution emphasizes that Korea should be a self-made and independent nation, especially with regard to politics, economics, and defense.

In Chaouki Ajami's "Juche: Theory and Application" he states that the independent stand has two concrete aspects. The first aspect is that one should reject dependence on others, think and judge everything with one's own brain and solve problems by one's self. The second aspect is that one should have faith in one's own strength and solve all problems in a revolutionary spirit of self-reliance(1978:9). Other treatises on Juche go on to emphasize strict independence and self-reliance in forming one's own destiny. North Korean leader Kim Jong il emphasized that consciousness is the awareness of being in charge of one's own destiny and shaping that destiny by one's own initiative(1985:37). Essentially, one is the master of one's fate and the power to control that fate rests with one's self(Suh 1988: 302).

Juche strives to develop independence and self-sufficiency for the nation and extends these values to man. It calls on man to be independent, self-sufficient, creative and determine his own destiny. In countries where governments do not provide for the people, citizens must learn to put these values into action. It is in democratic capitalist societies that people are to exercise independence in decision-making and the determining of one's future. Juche's very definition of man and his role involve

the core values that lie at the heart of democratic capitalism. Connections are easily made between the ideas of man as the master of everything and his own destiny. Also valued by both systems is a sense of ingenuity in using one's own brain to solve problems and to be self-sufficient. Such democratic capitalist language and ideas are abundant and find almost *ad nauseam* use in various treatises on Juche published out of Pyongyang. As was previously noted, the Juche idea is constantly studied by North Korean citizens and the core values that it inculcates are certainly present whether consciously or unconsciously. Despite the other manifold political and nationalistic ideas and concepts associated with Juche, its core values are in tune with the foundational principles of democratic capitalism.

Another area where Juche and democratic capitalism find a common connection is in the role of institutions. According to Juche principles, institutions are to serve the people (Park 1998:39). Kim Il sung would go on to explain that the government should consider it a duty to safeguard and protect the interests of the working masses and that government organizations should be the servants of the people. In order to serve the people, the government should give support to democracy in state activities. Democracy means that the state formulates policy in compliance with the will of the working masses and carries it out in their interests. The working masses are entitled by right to participate in the work of the people's government as the masters of state power (1982: 322-324). Despite the connections that can be made regarding such shared values as independence, self-reliance, self-determination, and the role of institutions Juche is not free of certain ideas that pose challenges to commonly held democratic capitalist values.

Challenges

Compatibility of Juche values and ideas with those in democratic capitalism is certainly not free of obstacles. Although there are common core values between the ideologies, the process to help North Korean citizens realize connections that will aid their assimilation is not simple. North Korea still operates under communist guidelines, which emphasize a collective society and mentality. Branching out from this collective orientation are three Juche concepts that make compatibility between it and democratic capitalism difficult. These three concepts are the **suryong**, **party**, and **mass line** which result in the de-emphasis of the individual.

The concept of the suryong is considered essential to the functioning of Juche ideology. The word **suryong** means '*leader*', '*the head*' or '*the boss*.' In Juche, the suryong plays an almost God-like role as the ultimate or supreme leader. So far only Kim Il sung has held the title of suryong and it is expected that Kim Jong il will eventually gain the title as well. The leader or suryong is viewed as the highest brain of the people who guides the revolutionary struggle for independence. The leader occupies the same place as the brain in the human body. Just as the brain controls and regulates all functions of the human organism, so does the suryong control and regulate all functions of the state organism. The leader is seen as the embodiment of the interests of the masses and every thought and intention that the leader has represents the will of the popular masses. It is very important to note that the masses can only realize their intentions and demands when they act in accordance with the orientation and directions of the leader (Kim C.H. 1984: 178). In one of his treatises on Juche, Kim Jong il noted that the masses must be brought into contact with correct leadership in order to carry out their role as the subject of history. It is

only under correct leadership that the masses will be able to perform their role as the subjects of socio-historical development and further the efforts of the revolution(1985: 27).

Closely connected to the suryong is the party, which acts as the nexus or the central nerve of the organism. The party serves as a medium between the leader and the masses. The party also inspires loyalty of the masses for the leader. It helps in binding the system together as it emphasizes ideological education of cadres and discipline within the organization. The structure of the regime in North Korea is seen as a 'socio-political organism.' This kind of regime structure is collectivist in nature where individuals should serve the society they are a part of(Kim S.C. 1992: 162-163). Such a state organism is controlled by the brain(leader) who interacts with the masses through the party or 'central nerve'. The masses can be seen as a group of cells acting in accordance with the directives and wishes of the brain as he controls the whole system.

The North Korean emphasis on the collective effort of the masses results in a de-emphasis of the individual. Despite the statement that "Jucheism regards man as an individual being..." the overall emphasis is on the masses and the people working together as a collective unit(qtd. in Belke 1999: 32). Closely Hegelian in nature, Juche stresses that the success of the revolution and its construction depends on the creative efforts of the popular masses and that the strength of the masses is to be found in the social unit of the state(Kim J.I. 1985: 56-57). When the masses are not united, they are unable to exist as creative beings and cannot realize their strength to the fullest(Kim 1991:101).

Juche defines man as a social being. People will not be able to transform nature and society as an individual and the characteristics of Chajusong, creativity, and consciousness are only available when one belongs to the social community(Exposition of the Juche Idea 1983: 23).

Kim Il Sung emphatically stated that selfishness, individualism, and egoism are petty bourgeois notions. The true meaning of 'revolutionize' is to root out egoism, individualism, and other bourgeois ideas. What must be done is to cultivate a proper communist ideological awareness by giving priority to the interests of the collective or the whole but not the individual. The truly transformed person is willing to fight for the masses and the people at the sacrifice of individual interests(1984: 417-418).

The Juche notions of the suryong, party, and mass line all result in a collective and mass mentality that does not allow for individual thinking or action. Despite the Juche concepts of self-reliance and self-determination, they are not applied at the individual level but only at the state level which is viewed as an organism. This presents a challenge to democratic capitalist values as more emphasis is placed on the individual rather than the group . The Juche notions of independence and solving problems creatively with one's own brain also do not apply to the individual. This would explain to some extent why defectors have such a difficult time taking charge of their own lives when they begin their new life in South Korea. North Koreans, although their ideology stresses otherwise, are not used to making decisions for themselves as they have always relied on the party and the leader to determine everything. The Juche idea, while stressing initiative and self-determination, finds no application at the individual level for North Korean citizens. At the subconscious level, North Korean citizens possess the Juche ideas that man is the master of all

things and decides everything but they have never considered acting on these ideas for themselves. The notion of the suryong guiding for the masses prevents North Koreans from seeing through the lens of 'I' or the individual with respect to the revolution and its construction. The notion of being in charge of one's destiny is not realized and what results is difficulty with the self-reliance and competition that a democratic capitalist system demands(Kim M. S. 1998:61). Extending from this difficulty adapting, is the challenge of taking responsibility for one's own life and future(67). It is not an easy task to have defectors separate themselves from collectivist notions and the necessity of the all-guiding brain who will make decisions and direct the course of the people's future.

Conclusion: Juche and the Individual

At the core of Juche values, are the notions of self-reliance, self-determination, independence and creativity which are in line with the values pursued by a democratic capitalist system. However, juxtaposed with these are communist collective notions that use control mechanisms such as the suryong, party, and mass line that are contrary to democratic capitalism's notions of individual responsibility and initiative. Can the already present Juche world view help or assist North Koreans in their attempt to adapt to the values that are found in a democratic capitalist system? Can Juche ideas help one be independent and self-reliant at the individual level?

It is important to recall the power of ideology in North Korea and the intensity of the indoctrination process. North Korean citizens, as they adapt to a different ideological system, will likely interpret their new experiences through the Juche constructs they already possess. Therefore, it is important to help North Koreans use this knowledge in learning how to function in a democratic capitalist system. What is needed is to help them translate Juche values at the individual level. Juche and democratic capitalism share the values of self-reliance, self-determination, independence, and creativity but differ in the operation of these values. Juche translates these values at the macro-level of the state or the masses as one organism. Democratic capitalism translates the same values but at the micro-level of the individual where they can be personally realized.

Therefore, translation of Juche values at the micro-level should be one of the primary goals of education programs that endeavor to help defectors adapt to life in South Korea. The curriculum of such programs should utilize methods for achieving an operational shift of Juche values by first drawing common connections through which to establish a shared interpretive framework. Secondly, the actualization of those values at the individual level must be emphasized through a de-emphasis of reliance on the suryong or party to provide guidance and make decisions. North Korean citizens need to understand that self-reliance, self-determination, independence and creativity have their maximum potential at the individual level. A full deconstructing of the Juche world view is unnecessary as it has an important role to play in the assimilation process. Even for defectors who are completely disillusioned with Juche's apparent false promises, the chance to see its values actualized may provide hope and lay foundations on which to stand in the new ideological system of South Korea.

Another possibility demanding further study is the so called '*neo-juche*' idea. The neo-Juche idea is considered progressive and seeks to apply Juche principles to

capitalism and the individual. Neo-Jucheism opposes the governing ideology of the North Korean regime. It states that a socialist central economy is not adequate and therefore promotes capitalist values and economics. Neo-Jucheism also opposes socialist collectivism and allows for individualism and capitalist views of society and people (Belke 1999:247). The highest level North Korean defector and chief architect of the Juche idea, Hwang Jang Yop, made this insightful observation concerning where Juche values may be best realized:

The market is a place where a man's nature of self-reliance is associated with his creativity. Therefore, the development of the market makes enhanced creative ardors in a person. (qtd. in Belke: 247).

This statement certainly has neo-Juche overtones and illustrates the need to allow the Juche values of self-reliance and creativity to act within a market system where they can properly flourish. Neo-Juche creates the possibility for Juche values to assume their more appropriate actualization in the democratic capitalist environment where the individual is valued. It is in the democratic capitalist system where one must be self-reliant by applying creativity and solving problems on one's own with little or no dependence on others.

Juche should be viewed as a valuable tool that can be utilized to help North Koreans adapt to democratic capitalism through realizing the values of self-reliance, self-determination, independence and creativity. Although the Juche elements of the *suryong*, party, and mass line serve as controlling mechanisms of the collective, a shift in the operation of Juche values to the micro-level of the individual is needed. The best environment for such a process can be found in education programs that assist in the assimilation work of North Koreans. Even in the event of sudden reunification, nationwide training programs to help North Korean citizens operate in the democratic capitalist system will be needed. Illustrating the shared values of Juche and democratic capitalism and educating to translate those values to the micro-level is one way this can be achieved. Pursuing Juche values at the individual level allows for self-reliance and full realization of human potential and capacity. Regrettably, in a ravaged and moribund economy where North Korean citizens are reportedly searching in the forests and fields for things to eat, people are already learning, in the harshest way, what it means to be self-reliant.

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