

Ideological Changes in North Korea since the 1990s

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1. Introduction

Does political ideology still matter, at “the end of history?” Yes it does, at least in North Korea. In a totalitarian society like North Korea, “the official ideology” of the single and ruling party plays very important roles: interpreting the history, the present situation, and the final destination of mankind; presenting the mission to be performed and the methods to be adopted; justifying the one party dictatorship and all its policies and practices(Friedrich and Brezezinski 1965: 88-89; Linz 1975: 191, 196; Schapiro 1972: 55). In North Korea, the official ideology, Juche Idea, has been the one and only guiding idea of the Workers’ Party of Korea(WPK) since early 1970s. Since then “making the whole society into a society of Juche Idea” has been “the supreme platform of the Party,” by which they mean “all the party members and workers should think and act in accordance with the requirements of Juche Idea”(Kim Jong Il 1982)

I don’t know exactly how successful the North Korean leadership has been in making a Juche society. However the contents and the changes, major or minor, of their official ideology can tell us how they perceive their internal and external environments and what they are doing now and intend to do in the future. In other words, a solid study on their political ideology and its changes can provide us very meaningful clues and insights to its politics in particular and to the whole society in general, past present and future.

Juche was first introduced in the mid-1950s as “Juche in thinking.” Since then it has been enriched, developed, upgraded, and systematized. In the early 1990s, North Korean leadership was confronted with a new global environment: their “socialist brother countries” including the Soviet Union were dissolved or collapsed. Also in 1994, “the great leader” Kim Il Sung suddenly died. In addition, they suffered from several years of natural disasters including repeated drought and flood. Thus many observers predicted that a major change in their ideology (and policies) would occur accordingly. Actually there appeared some new slogans, concepts, ideas, and even philosophy such as “the red flag philosophy.” What are the contents of these? Do they constitute any meaningful changes in the existing ideology? What do they imply? I will attempt to answer these questions in the following sectors. Let me start with some comments on selected key words, which may, hopefully, give a better understanding, especially to those who have non-Korean speaking background.

2. Comments on selected key words

2.1. Juche, independence, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance

Juche(主體) is a Korean word written in English as it is pronounced. Literally it means “main body,” but it also means “subject” or “subjectivity” as opposed to

“object” or “objectivity,” and “master” as opposed to “slave.” In the context of international relations, it means independence or nationalism. Thus “Juche in thinking” means an independent way of thinking or creative interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, as opposed to dogmatic or revisionist interpretations.

Independence as shown in “independence in politics” is English translation of “Jaju”(自主), which literally means “self-master.” It means self-determination as well as independence.

Self-sufficiency as in “self-sufficiency in economy” is a translation of “Jarib”(自立), which literally means “self-standing.” I think that self-standing is a better translation than self-sufficiency, though it may be rather unfamiliar to native speakers of English. Anyway it means self-running economy even when assistance from outside is not available.

Self-reliance as in “self-reliance in defense” is a translation of “Jawui”(自衛), which literally means “self-defense.” Here once again, I think self-defense is a better translation.

2.2. Philosophy, -ism, thought, thinking, idea, ideology and the hierarchy

Philosophy is used as a system of thought containing world outlook, like idealism vs. materialism and metaphysics vs. dialectic. In some cases it is used as world outlook itself. When they refer to someone’s philosophy, they call it someone-ism, like Marxism, Kimism.

However -ism is also used to refer to spirit, mentality, or way of thinking. For instance “Korean-Nation-Firstism” is not philosophy, but spirit.

Thought, thinking, idea and ideology are all translations of the same Korean word “Sasang.”(思想) The translation differs as such, depending on the location of the word “Sasang” in a given text. Idea in “Juche Idea,” however, is fixed one.

It should be noted that the North Korean writers are well aware of the hierarchy between “Juui”(-ism or philosophy) and “Sasang.” As is the case in China, Juui is of fundamentals or principles while “Sasang” is of its adaptations, applications however creative or not, under given, particular conditions. Thus the former is something that cannot be changed while the latter can be changed. Juche Idea is just Sasang, not Juui, although every now and then they mention Kimism or Juche philosophy.

3. What was their ideology?

3.1. “Juche in ideology” and the four principles

It was in the year 1955 when the term “Juche” was officially introduced for the first time. In a speech delivered to party cadres, Kim Il Sung stressed “Juche in ideological works” and opposed dogmatism and formalism prevailing in the party at that time. He described Juche as “our style” of Marxism-Leninism. It was a creative application of the principles of Marxism-Leninism in accordance with concrete Korean situations and “Korean national characteristics” while adhering thoroughly to the principles. In describing “our style” in detail, he made a very interesting figuration: “It does not matter whether you use a spoon or chopsticks, your right hand or left hand when you are eating”(Kim Il Sung 1977: 145).

It should be noted that in the very first appearance Juche was related closely to Korean nationalism. In addition to his reference to “Korean national characteristics,” he emphasized Korean history, geography, and the customs and traditions of Korean people. He mentioned morality such as “respecting seniors.” He strongly accused some cadres of bad behavior toward their seniors. This was,

and still is, one of the old Korean traditions, Confucian one. However this sort of Korean nationalism maintained a low profile in the shade of creative application of Marxism-Leninism.

Since 1955 “Juche in ideology” has been developed, enriched, and systematized year by year. At the end of 1960s, it became “Juche Idea” which was composed of the four principles: Juche in ideology, independence in politics, self-sufficiency in economics, self-reliance in defense. This Idea became “the only idea” of the party at the fifth congress of WPK in 1970.

Juche in ideology as one of the four principles was fundamentally the same as when it first appeared in 1955. Independence in politics and self-reliance in defense have no special meaning other than as the words themselves are generally understood. However we may have to pay more attention to the concept of self-sufficiency in economics. Sometimes this concept has been as “closed economy” by outside watchers. Kim Il Sung himself made it very clear that the self-sufficiency did not mean the closed economy. From the very beginning he emphasized the importance of international trade and cooperation. He did not exclude even the possibility of accepting foreign aid. In fact he said, “If you provide economic aid, we will accept it, but if you don’t, we will be OK nevertheless. This is the principle of self-sufficiency”(Kim Il Sung 1977: 208). This means that their choice of self-sufficiency was rather a forced or negative response to the permanent economic sanctions posed by the United States and the cut-off of economic aid from the Soviet Union than a positive choice of their own. This way they don’t have to feel any kind of uneasiness with the principle of self-sufficiency when they accept foreign aid or economic cooperation.

Juche Idea as four principles was still claimed as an application of Marxism-Leninism. But in its main thrust or values, it was something not far from Korean nationalism. And it was rather a set of lines or principles of policy than a system of idea or thought.

3.2. The philosophical principle and the all-in-one system of Juche Idea

“The philosophical principle” of Juche Idea was introduced in the early 1970s. At an interview with Japanese news reporters in 1972, Kim Il Sung described man “as master of everything who decides everything.” At another interview with Australian reporters in 1974, he described the philosophical foundation of Juche Idea unequivocally: “Juche Idea is based on the philosophical foundation that man is master of everything and man decides everything”(Kim Il Sung 1977: 564-565).

From this time Juche Idea was claimed as having its own philosophical foundation. However it took needed nearly one decade for the philosophy to be fully sophisticated. And all the other fragments of Kim’s ideas that had been mentioned were collected, modified, and systematized. As a result, Kim Jong Il’s treatise, “On the Juche Idea” was publicized on Kim Il Sung’s 70th birthday in 1982. They call it “all-in-one systematization of Juche Idea.”

According to this treatise, Juche Idea is composed of three parts: philosophical principle, the laws of historical development and social revolution, and the guiding principles. The philosophical principle is the principle of “man-centered philosophy that explains man’s position and role in the world.” What is man? “Man is a social being with independence, creativity and consciousness.” Therefore “man holds a special position and plays a special role as master of the world.” That is, “man is the master of everything and decides everything.”

The laws of history are as follows: the working masses are the subject of history

and the motive force of social progress, the history of human society is the history of the struggle of popular masses to defend and realize independence, the socio-historical movement is a creative movement of popular masses to transform and change nature and society, and the revolution is propelled to victory by the conscious struggle of masses of the people.

The guiding principles are composed of three parts: the independent stand, the creative method, and enhancing the role of ideological consciousness. The independent stand comprises the following four principles: Juche in ideology, independence in politics, self-sufficiency in economy, and self-reliance in defense. The creative method is “to solve all problems arising in the revolution and construction in conformity with the actual conditions by relying on the creativity of the people.” Enhancing the role of ideological consciousness is giving priority over all works to the remoulding of ideology and the political work.

At this stage, they claimed that Juche Idea was not just an application of Marxism-Leninism, but its “succession and development” or “succession and renovation.” However it was no more materialistic and dialectical than the traditional Confucianism of Korea. And they claimed the philosophical principle was “fresh and unique.” However Korean people have been very familiar to the man-centered philosophy from time immemorial. For instance, more than forty centuries ago the first king of the first Korean kingdom declared a man-centered principle as his ruling idea. And the Buddhism and Confucianism which were introduced later might have reinforced that tradition of man-centrism. In this sense, their principle is neither fresh nor unique. Furthermore they did not hide a very negative legacy of traditional Confucian authoritarianism by saying that “If they are to hold their position and fulfill their role as subject of history, the popular masses must be brought into contact with leader. 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.”

In its essence Juche Idea now has become a North Korean version of nationalism that had grown from experiences of resistance against foreign invaders since the 19th century, though it was officially denied. However in 1986 Kim Jong Il himself emphasized “our-nation-firstism.” I believe that this has formed a turning point of Juche Idea from covert nationalism to overt nationalism.

4. What is new since 1990?

4.1. The Spirit of Korean-Nation-First and the True Nationalism

Although there had been nationalist orientation in Juche Idea from the beginning, it was hidden in the shade of proletariat internationalism. When necessary, it was expressed as “socialist patriotism,” as was the case in the Soviet Union under Stalin. However in 1986 Kim Jong Il mentioned “our-nation-firstism” in an open manner. Further, he explained about this spirit in detail at a speech completely dedicated to “the spirit of Korean-nation-firstism” in 1989. According to him, the spirit of Korean-nation-firstism is a noble idea that is expressed in the pride and self-esteem emanating from the greatness of Korean nation and also in high level of self-consciousness as well as a will to enhance the greatness of Korean nation. He also addressed that Korean nation is the greatest in the world because of the leadership of the great leader and the great party, the great Juche Idea, and the supreme socialist regime.

This spirit is still far from the nationalism that we ordinary people think of. Two years later, his father closed the gap. Kim Il Sung made it very clear that nation

precedes class and “the true nationalism” should be differentiated from “the bourgeoisie nationalism.” He also stated that he himself had been a true nationalist, as well as his father. His true nationalism is the nationalism that defends “national interests.” National interests mean the independence, development and prosperity, and unity of the nation. He stressed that their political system and the whole society were built on the principle of nationalism, and also that this principle should be applied to the reunification process of both Koreas(Rodong Sinmun, 1 August 1991).

This “true nationalism” is what we are familiar with, just like the same old song of Arirang. Six years later in 1997, Kim Jong Il echoed another song of Arirang. In a lengthy treatise on “national character”(民族性), he declared “adherence to the Juche character and national character in revolution and construction is a fundamental principle.” He further explained that “sustaining the national character means preserving and developing their own fine national traits and embodying them in all spheres of social life.” “The fine traits of our people” are being resourceful and courageous, hating injustice, loving justice and truth, and valuing morality. This explanation of national character would not offend anybody, whether they are Korean or not. “The fine traits” here are quite different from the rationales of “the spirit of Korean-nation-first” in 1989.

Thus the great leader, founder of Juche Idea and his successor, the beloved leader became “the true nationalists” and their Juche Idea became “the true nationalism.” It seems to me that at this stage they didn’t have to rely solely on the appeal or attraction of severely damaged Marxism-Leninism, and that this stance will not be changed in the future. However this does not necessarily mean that they have given up adhering to socialism.

4.2. “Our Socialism” vs. other socialism

“Our style” or “our socialism” is also not new. Kim Il Sung emphasized “our style” in his speech in 1955, as mentioned earlier. However this time the term is acquiring a renewed importance by the fall of communism in Eastern Europe.

North Korean leadership has made great efforts to differentiate “our socialism” from other socialism. Kim Jong Il wrote at least seven major treatises on this single subject after 1991, which is very unusual. The seven works were devoted to theoretical elaborations and augmentation of his father’s one sentenced diagnosis in 1991: “The secret of the indestructibility and victory of our socialism lies on the fact that we have firmly established the Juche in the socialist construction”(Rodong Sinmun, 1 January 1991).

According to Kim Jong Il, “the secret of its durability and indestructibility is that it is centered upon the popular masses, that it has made the masses the genuine masters of society, and that it has devoted everything to the service of the masses. Because our socialism serves the popular masses, our people regard socialism as the cradle of their lives and of their happiness, and they entrust their destiny entirely to socialism.”(Kim Jong Il 1991) Therefore “the basic reason for the frustration of socialism in some other countries” is their failure in Juche(Kim Jong Il 1992a). Then the following question raises: where does this failure stem from?

Other socialists failed to overcome “the historical limitations of the communist theory of the previous age.” Marxism does not provide theories after the socialist revolution. Nevertheless some socialist applied Marxism dogmatically. After the establishment of socialist system, the economic factors do not play the role as a main force of historical development. It is popular masses equipped with socialism that play the decisive role. The economic factors do not automatically transform people

into socialists. Transforming people is in its essence remoulding their consciousness. So we socialists should give top priority to the transformation of people by remoulding their idea. The socialists of other countries could not understand this.

And some other socialists are accused of having denied the revolutionary essence of Marxism and pursuing a revisionist policy. It is indispensable to strengthen the working-class party and to ensure its leadership. This is a revolutionary principle, which must never be compromised. But some socialists introduced pluralism on the pretext of the “reform” and “restructuring” of socialism. Liberalism in ideology, multiparty system in politics, and diversity in the form of ownership which pluralism advocates are characteristics of capitalist society. These characteristics are something that can never be tolerated in a socialist society. Thus, “finally, the grave consequence of the ruin of the working-class parties themselves was incurred”(Kim Jong Il 1992a)

To be short, the differences between “our socialism” and other socialism lie on “Juche” on the one hand, and the one party dictatorship on the other. “Our socialism” succeeded in the transformation of man through ideological remoulding or revolution in accordance with Juche Idea, while other socialism failed. “Our socialism” adhered to the principle of proletariat dictatorship, while other socialism abandoned the principle. This is why North Korean Juche society, based on Juche Idea, survived as a strong fortress of socialism while other perished. Their logic implies that they have no intention to change their ideology, political system, and the whole society as long as possible.

4.3. The Red Flag Philosophy

If reality requires a new idea, thought or philosophy, the great leader and philosopher should present something new. Here is “the red flag philosophy.”

The red flag philosophy was presented for the first time in the New Year’s Joint Editorial of Rodong Sinmun(the worker’s newspaper), Joson Inmingun(the daily of the KPA), and Chongnyon Jonwi(the daily of the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League) in 1996. Shortly later, the Rodong Sinmun described the philosophy just a little more specifically. The philosophy was founded by Kim Jong Il, and was composed of three parts: the revolutionary philosophy of Juche, the philosophy of the single-hearted unity, and the philosophy of belief in socialism. The newspaper did not differentiate philosophy from thought(9 January 1996). But one year later in 1997 the newspaper redefined it as follows: “This idea is, in essence, absolute worship for the leader of the revolution and the spirit of defending him even at the cost of life and sharing weal and woe with him to the last”(1 January 1997). That was all. I mean there was no further explanation that would probably make someone believe it as a real philosophy. Since then, however, this “philosophy” or thought has repeatedly appeared in their major documents for three years.

“Red flag” itself is not new. It symbolizes communism, communist revolution, or communist party or country. Not surprisingly the national flag of North Korea is also red. Traditionally the color red implies a man’s loyalty toward his king, or a woman’s fidelity and devoted love toward her lover. What is new is the term “philosophy” or “thought.” For this reason some outside watchers speculated that it replaced Juche Idea thereby enhancing Kim Jong Il’s own leadership not inherited from his father.

However this speculation was proven to be premature. The content of the “philosophy” does not at all deserve the term philosophy. It is nothing more than a slogan, the slogan which did not last very long. Since 1999 the term has disappeared.

While the newspaper was trumpeting the “philosophy,” Kim Jong Il himself was busy preparing a treatise on the uniqueness of his father’s Juche “philosophy”(Kim Jong Il 1996). It seems to me that the red flag “philosophy” was an incident made by some party cadres without consulting with their seniors.

4.4. New slogans and old slogans revived

For several years after Kim Il Sung’s death, North Korea suffered from unprecedented and extraordinary hardship and difficulties. Their response was something like this: let’s endure and overcome the hardship with our spiritual power. Where does their spiritual power come from? Clinging to the greatness of the leader, Juche Idea, “our style” socialist system, and the red flag philosophy was not good enough. They needed desperately something more effective. Here appeared “The Spirit of Arduous March.”

“The arduous march” depicts a historical event that Kim Il Sung’s guerilla units suffered very severely from the imperial Japanese army’s massive and thorough anti-guerilla military campaign in the late 1930s. The revived spirit of the arduous march was defined as the revolutionary spirit of fulfilling revolution with its own power even in hardship, the optimistic spirit of overcoming obstacles even in difficulties, and the undefeatable spirit of fighting against hardship without any comfort(Rodong Sinmun, 1 January 1996). This slogan dominated their news media for at least two years. In the New Year editorial of 1998, they implied the end of the march. And a new slogan of “the forced march of socialism” seemed to replace the arduous march. But according to the New Year editorial of 2001, the arduous march was reported to have ended in 2000.

The contents of “the arduous march” are not new either. The march just shows how hard and difficult their situations were in the last few years of the 20th century. In the process of the march, their slogans or rhetoric became more and more militant, combatant and extreme, and the old Confucian morality became revitalized and re-emphasized much more than ever. It is easy to find such expressions as “even at a cost of life,” “death-defying,” “single-hearted,” “resolute,” “iron fists,” “steel-strong,” “fighting spirit,” “do-or-die spirit,” “spirit of human bombs,” etc. Also it is easy to find such Confucian expressions as “loyalty,” “fidelity,” “love,” “morality,” “conscience,” “justice,” “credibility,” “respect of seniors,” “comradeship,” “faith,” “belief,” “confidence,” etc. Among these, “comradeship,” or “love of comrade” was recently spotlighted as “philosophy of comradeship”(Rodong Sinmun, 24 April 2001). But Kim Jong Il has not been credited with a fatherly image which his father had long enjoyed.

In the meantime, the Rodong Sinmun suddenly declared building “powerful socialist state” in August 1998. In the New Year editorial next year, the newspaper explained that the “powerful socialist state” as an ideologically, militarily and economically powerful state. The emphasis was given to the economy. Although the arduous march continued until 2000, the powerful state became dominant slogan from this time. This seems to imply that their hardship became more tolerable since the mid-1998. Since 1999, their militant extreme slogans and Confucian expressions receded. This in turn implies that they can afford to be flexible only when their situations are getting better.

The year 1998 is remembered as the first year when “the army-first politics” was announced. This means “giving top priority to the military affairs and pushing ahead with the socialist cause with the revolutionary army as the main force”(Rodong Sinmun, 1 January 2001). Kim Jong Il said “the army-first politics is the basic

political style of mine and an all-mighty sword to lead our revolution toward victory”(Rodong Sinmun, 1 June 1999). His political style had often been characterized as “benevolence politics,” “big-scale politics,” or “music politics” in the past. During the period of the arduous march, though, he spent very much of his time on visiting army units, although we don’t know whether he really allocated more money and resources to the army or not. Anyway his army-first politics may be a product of a situation where he has to do so in order to maintain the existing system, as most outside watchers speculate. At the same time, however, it needs to be noted that the army, as a massive, well-disciplined and free labor force, for example, on many construction sites, has been exploited, and that visiting the army does not require much money.

5. Conclusion

North Korean official ideology was and is Juche Idea. At the beginning it was an application of Marxism-Leninism with nationalist orientation. In 1982 it became a systematic idea, as succession and development of Marxism-Leninism, but still maintaining nationalist orientation.

In 1990s they introduced a new name of Juche Idea, “the true nationalism,” which was hidden for a long time. They also tried very hard to differentiate their socialism from other socialism. The logic is like this: Juche Idea succeeded the revolutionary essence of Marxism on the one hand, and it overcame the historical limitations of Marxism and developed “fresh and unique” philosophy and theories suitable for the new era after socialist revolution on the other. This is why Juche society based on Juche Idea has survived as a strong fortress socialism, while others have perished.

However, after Kim Il Sung’s death they had to launch “the arduous march”, “the forced march of socialism.” This required more exciting, militant, extreme slogans such as the red flag philosophy, “the death-defying spirit,” “the spirit of human bombs.” Also many century-old Confucian virtues such as “loyalty,” “fidelity,” “comradeship,” and “conscience” were needed. In the meantime a blueprint of “the powerful socialist state” was presented in 1998. Accordingly the extreme rhetoric was toned down since 1999.

All the ideas, concepts, and slogans do not constitute any meaningful change in their Juche Idea. This implies that they have no intention to change their ideology as well as their society. However they tend to consider some changes if their situations are better. For instance, Kim Jong Il said “we must solve all problems **from a new point of view and from a new height of view**”(Rodong Sinmun, 4 January 2001). This remark was made possible after the successful arduous march. So if there is anyone who wants to see some positive and constructive changes without massive violence in North Korea, he/she might have to contribute to the development toward such direction.

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