

Special Feature

The Resurrection of Confucianism in North Korea

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In understanding Juche ideology in North Korea, the past and present, the old and new, and things Korean and Marxist can be seen as closely intertwined with one other. In this sense, the fusion of traditional Confucianism and Marxism could be understood as being on top of the base layer of Korean tradition.

Of course, while socialism in North Korea can be seen as a radical destruction of traditional culture, I see it differently. Juche ideology, emblematic of North Korean socialism, appears to have strong ties to traditional Confucianism. To put it differently, the North Korean system has particularities that differentiate it from general patterns readily observable in socialist states. North Korea has a traditional culture that is different from that of other socialist states, and that traditional culture continues to exert a strong influence upon it.

Confucian culture ruled supreme during the five hundred years of Joseon Dynasty, and ethical values such as the Three Bonds and Five Relationships regulated everyday behaviors and exerted enormous influence upon thought and livelihood. Korean acceptance and adherence to Confucianism was nearly complete, and the Koreans of Joseon did not recognize any other political and social ideologies. It deeply transformed the Korean nation. Confucian culture generated authoritarian particularities in political culture, and such authoritarianism influenced the formation of the political culture in North Korea in important ways.

Confucianism provides not only content for political ideology, which in North Korea forms the foundation of the sociopolitical organization, but also a method of analyzing politics. It also provides a forum for communication and ethics that binds the society together, and continues to play an important role in rationalizing such actions and institutions. Under its influence, in North Korea, education came to be seen as a behavior-changer. Education is seen as ethical training, through which sociopolitical problems can be resolved (Chung and Kwon 2009:29-46). By imitating the idealized human model, a new humanity can be created. The significance of education as ethical training is the internalization of control and discipline, as the focus is on changing and reforming of the people's everyday behaviors. As in Confucianism, Juche ideology also stresses the formation of a new communist humanity through the unity of thought and conduct. In other words, Juche ideology places importance upon the relationship between

theory and action, and argues that action comes before theory.

Confucianism, which was blindly accepted during the Joseon era, began to be openly denied and repudiated by new intellectuals such as Yun Chiho and Yi Gwangsu during the Japanese colonial period's process of modernization. They, quite logically, explain how the effects of the Three Bonds and Five Relationships of Confucianism ruined Joseon society. On the other hand, new socialist intellectuals of the colonial period, influenced by Soviet Russia's Marxism-Leninism, embraced Marxist materialism as a theoretical weapon to defeat imperialism and began attacking pre-modern and backward Joseon Confucianism. Confucianism, which was attacked as a feudal ideology during the colonial period and the early years of the North Korean state, was later incorporated into the Juche ideology that justified the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il regimes after the abandonment of Marxism-Leninism in North Korea.

To prove the abovementioned thesis, I will demonstrate how Confucianism, as a form of traditional thought, had been denied through the colonial period and the early years of the North Korean regime, but how it was revived in the Juche ideology as authoritarianism in North Korea.

Critique of Confucianism in the Colonial Period

Joseph R. Levenson believed that Confucianism and modernity are mutually exclusive, and modernization cannot occur without destruction of the older order. A number of scholars of the West agreed with that opinion during the 1950s and 1960s. Mary C. Wright, the author of *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism* (1957) argued as follows:

...That conservatism has been tried in modern China under extraordinarily favorable conditions; that the performance was brilliant but the final result dismal failure; that the obstacles to successful adaptation to the modern world were not imperialist aggression, Manchu rule, mandarin stupidity, or the accidents of history, but nothing less than the constituent elements of the Confucian system itself. (Wright 1957:9-10)

Her argument is that Confucianism can be in harmony with socialism but not so much with modernity.

Characteristics of modernity in Korea have long been a topic of discussion in the fields of social studies and history. The focus of such discussions has generally been the characteristics of modernity and its agency. Modernity can be seen as a terminology of periodization, generalizing experiences of European history in the streams of world history. The Korean peninsula followed a similar path to other non-western societies in the sense that it experienced modernity from the period of Western domination.

The beginning of modernity in Korea started with critiques against Confucianism. Yun Chiho, who had the first opportunity to experience Japan and the West among nineteenth-century Korean intellectuals, began criticizing Confucian ethics even before the Kabo reforms. Although only expressed in private in his diary, he nevertheless harshly criticizes Confucianism.

What has made Corea a hell is Confucianism; not that the system teaches all the bad things of which the Corea is guilty but that it sanctions their causes without having anything to mitigate their evil effects. Would to Heaven that the Chinese literature, whose influence on our Eastern mind has been as disastrous as that of opium on our physical organism, had never been known in Corea! (Yun 1893)

For a daring and public denouncement of Confucianism, we must wait until Yi Gwangsu. In midst of broad critiques against Confucianism, Yi Gwangsu argued for active adoption of Western ethics in his article “On New Life” (*Sinsaenghwalron*). While emphasizing the critical importance of modern education, Yi Gwangsu argued for the “revolution” of a new lifestyle. Yi, however, moaning that the Korean society of his time was struggling in understanding and adopting it, rationalized the reasons why as follows:

First, under the duress of centuries of Confucian domination, people have lost the freedom and ability of critical thinking. Second, absorption of new thought is not yet sufficient, and new awakening through the baptism of new civilization is not yet strong enough. (Yi 1979:326)

For Yi Gwangsu, who opened his eyes to modernization during the Japanese colonial period, it was inevitable that he criticize Confucianism in favor of an acceptance of the new discourse of modern civilization. First, he criticizes

“the ideology of filial piety” with the following:

The center of ethics in Confucianism is filial piety. While other religions prioritize obligations to a superhuman deity, Confucianism places obligations toward one’s parents as the most important duty in life. ... The ideology of filial piety absolutizes the power of parents. Such absolutization caused negative effects upon the society. The first of such effects is a propensity for dependence. ... The second is the overall lack of reformist energy. ... As stated above, Confucianism’s idealism of filial piety absolutized the power of parents, and such absolutization caused critical harm to both the individual and the society. (Yi 1979:333-334)

Next, he explains “marital relations” and criticizes problems of Confucian ethics as follows:

The Confucianism that I speak of is that of Joseon. What I am focusing on in particular is the social system that was built under the influence of Confucianism and the harmful effects of it. First, the marital relationship is defined by the predominance of men over women. ... To state the gist of my arguments, traditional Confucian marital relations have the following flaws: the predominance of men over women, the formalism of parental authority, the bypassing of individual happiness, and the fact that affection and respect are not the fundamental requisites for marriage. The biggest flaw of them all is the fact that personal affection and respect are not the fundamental requisites for marriage. Almost all tragedies and problems of marriages in Joseon Korea stem from this. (Yi 1979:335-337)

As seen in the above quotes, Yi Gwangsu criticized the harmful effects of Confucianism upon Joseon. An important point is that Yi Gwangsu already began to criticize the illogicality of the distinction between husband and wife, arguing for the need for freedom in love and marriage. Taking a step further, Yi criticizes Confucian scholars by concluding the following:

The Confucian ideology I wrote of above should include something essential about Confucianism itself as well as Joseon-specific interpretations made by Korean scholars. What I am trying to do is not to falsely accuse or criticize Confucianism out of a vendetta or prejudice against it, but to make a fair criticism of the past lifestyles of Joseon. (Yi 1979:344)

If Yi Gwangsu's critique of and attacks on Confucianism centered around the issue of ethics, Gwon Deokgyu's attacks centered on the issue of state independence and the traditional Korean submission to China. His points are clear in his writings in the *Donga ilbo* of May 8, 1920:

[I am talking about] Confucian scholars of Joseon, particularly those of the Zhu Xi school of thought, and most especially Ming loyalists. Where did they get their thoughts from? While they are born and raised in Joseon, all they ever think of is the Great Ming and not Joseon. ... Ah, Confucians who have inverted the self and the other ... I therefore name you "those without real names." ... While they probably do not think of themselves as such, it is likely that they will practice the wrong custom of worship the thief as their father. (Gwon 1920)

Here, Gwon Deokgyu is criticizing the fact that Joseon Confucians continue to protect their old Joseon worship of the Ming despite the winds of modernization during the colonial period.

As we have seen, attacks on Confucianism that continued from the 1880s into the 1910s became the dominant new trend among the new intellectuals after the March First Movement. We can find evidence for this development in an editorial "Sin dodeok eul ron hayeo sin sahoe reul mang hanora" featured in the *Donga ilbo* of July 18, 1920:

Do you want to sustain the old society? It has already shipwrecked. Do you want to continue adhering to the old ethics? They have already lost their authority. ... Then what is the content of the new ethics relying on the actual characteristics of mankind? The ethics of old focused on personal relationships over the person themselves. ... Freedom is the most fundamental characteristic of mankind. Without freedom, development is impossible, and ethics must guarantee freedom in order to ensure development. Sufficient development of such characteristics is personality, and that is why modern ethics is called personalism. That is why modern ethics both begins and ends with freedom. (*Donga ilbo* 1920c)

Looking at the quote, it is evident that the criticism against the old morals centers on the blind submission to the monarch as well as one's father and other superiors, while the praise for the new ethics focus on the guarantee of individual freedom and equality. Taking a step further, the new ethics argued

for the following on the issue of family.

... As I have already mentioned, children do not exist in service to their ancestors or for their parents. The only reason for their existence is to achieve their god-given destiny by cultivating a well-rounded personality and following the path of natural development. (*Donga ilbo* 1920a)

In discussing the most fundamental aspect of the ethics of the household, the thrust of the critique is on the institution of marriage. In other words, forced marriages create misfortune, and the only way of defeating the problem is marriage based on love. Going a step further, it argues that carrying out ancestral rites is not an automatic obligation of the children or the purpose of their existence. The most important aspect of individual life here is free will. Lastly, the following is argued in “Gukgae daehan sindodeok.”

...Now, we argue for a new ethics against the state. The state is an organization of the people. The politics of it must include participation of the people. A true government is a natural right of the people. ... Therefore we argue that the first element of the new ethics is the right of political participation, and the second is the liberation of classes. (*Donga ilbo* 1920b)

Here, the sovereignty of a state is not in the hands of the ruler, but in the hands of the citizens. The need for liberation for freedom from old authoritarianism is emphasized.

In other words, the Westernization movement expressed deep disillusionment toward Confucian values and institutions. The Enlightenment ideology, headed by science and democracy, criticized in depth the Confucian worldview and morals. By this time, Confucianism lost its place and role as a state ideology.

Socialism, which began to enter Korea starting from the 1920s, also criticized Confucianism as it spread. Concerning the incident of the defamation of Confucius in 1931, Kim Gu attacked Confucianism as follows:

It is too antiquated to be an academic theory. It is too trite to become an ethic. Confucianism is incapable of advancing on its own, and this incapability is inherent in its roots. (Kwon 2010:1411)

As we have examined, the Japanese colonial period was a period during which modern society was formed in Korea, and traditional elements such as Confucianism came under intense critique by the new intellectuals. Confucianism was also strongly repudiated by Marxism-Leninism during the process of adopting socialism in the formative early years of the North Korean regime.

Critique of Confucianism during the Formative Years of the North Korean Regime

In carrying out the construction of socialism, North Korea embraced the element of class struggle from Marxism. Not only emphasizing the eventual victory of the proletariat, they internally strengthened elements of nationalism while arguing for the liberation of nations suffering under imperialism (Kwon 1999:534-536). However, such nationalism was in line with almost unconditional praise of the Soviet Union, reminiscent of traditional *sadae* ideology.

A document from 1946 that clearly displays such content is “8.15 haebang 1 junyeon pyeongyangsi gyeongchukdaehoe eseo han bogo” which states:

We all know that the Korean people's freedom was obtained through the price our revolutionary forefathers paid with their blood in the battle against the enemy as well as the sacrifices and active assistance of the great Soviet army. ... All facts testify that the Soviet Union has no intent of invading the territories of other nations or conquering other peoples, clearly displaying that the Soviet Union simply cannot have such goals in war. Acting in opposition to other imperialistic powers and their wars, the focus of Soviet foreign policy is to protect world peace and liberate those under oppression. (Kim 1963:143-153)

The same perspective also can be found in the writings of Baek Namun, a socialist intellectual who played an important role in building North Korean socialism. In the introductory chapter of his travelogue to the Soviet Union, *Soryeon insang*, he states:

The Soviet Union is of course the only socialist state in the universe which all peoples of the world admire. I also have admired the great socialist nation—the Soviet Union. ... The Soviet Union is both the most advanced and the only socialist Soviet state in the world. (Baek 2005:9)

The North Korean ideology of the 1950s basically maintained pro-Soviet nationalism in the name of socialism. An article written by Choe Yeonghwan, “Haebang hu joseon hyeokmyeonge iteoseoui bukbanbu minjugiji,” demonstrates this as follows:

Under the condition of the Soviet army being stationed in northern part of our country and helping us, we have secured national liberation in half of our country. Through protecting our achievement so far and developing our democratic revolution in our revolutionary base could carry us through the war of national liberation. This struggle will allow us to unite our country and fully liberate the American zone of occupation. (Choe 1955:43)

This perspective is also evident in the following quote from *Joseon tongsa (Ha)*, published in 1958 in North Korea.

On August 15, 1945, the people of Korea were liberated from the long Japanese colonial rule by the great army of the Soviet Union. ... The Korean people, now liberated, entered the path of constructing an independent and democratic polity under favorable international conditions. ... The stationing of the Soviet army in North Korea was a strong protection against new encroachments by the imperialist powers for the newly liberated Korean people. It was a favorable factor for the Korean people in building a new democratic Korea. (Joseon Minjujueui Inmin Gonghwaguk Ryeoksa Yeonguso 1958:439-440)

As can be seen from the quotes above, North Korea in its early years (as late as 1958) cultivated pro-Soviet *sadae*-like nationalism for the new state-building. In other words, North Korean political elites not only cultivated “patriotic democracy” and “anti-imperialist ideology,” but also worship of the Soviet Union (Kim 1991:63-65). Through this process, North Korea also sought to depict South Korea as a state under continuing colonial domination of Japan and the United States.

Beloved countrymen! As North Korea is healthily developing into the direction of democracy, South Korea is in a grave danger of reverting back to a colony. ... Remnants of Japanese colonialism have not been purged, and the running dogs of the Japanese are now dressed in the uniforms of American imperialism, consolidating reactionaries in all aspects of politics, economy, and culture. (Kim 1963:160)

What the North Korean regime sought to inject during the process of socialist development was the national pride that had been damaged during the Japanese colonial period. These efforts aimed to alleviate the remnants of a sense of inferiority while encouraging revolutionary fervor as well as taking ownership of the development of socialism. However, this was conditioned upon worship of the Soviet Union, the socialist fatherland.

The treaty concluded between Korea and the Soviet Union on the issues of economy and culture was, considering independence of the two nations, concluded on absolutely equal and friendly grounds. Then what is the independence of Korea and the Soviet Union? ... The foreign policy of the Soviet Union abides by the principle of self-determination, respects independence, freedom and equality of other nations, and does not interfere in the affairs of other states. The Soviet policy of liberation of small and weak nations is a proof of this, and it is because Stalin's policy on nations is the principle of Soviet foreign policy. (Baek 2005:205-206)

An important thing here is that writings criticizing worship of the Soviet Union began to appear soon after Stalin's death. On December 28, 1955, at a mass campaign organized by the party, Kim Il Sung argued for "Juche" as an ideology through a speech called "Sasang saeob eseo gyojo jueui wa hyeongsik jueui reul toechihago juchereul hwakribhalde daehayeo."

We are not conducting the revolution of any other country but our own Joseon revolution. ... In order to carry out the Joseon revolution, we must first know Joseon history, Joseon geography, and Joseon customs. Only after that can we make them love their land and country. (Kim 1967:550-561)

As can be seen from the above, the rise of Juche ideology in North Korea went hand-in-hand with the emphasis on revolutionary tradition and expansion of independence in all state functions. The party leadership

changed the perspective on various national holidays including the liberation day (August 15th). Along with the rise of Juche ideology, the role of the Soviet Union in Korea's liberation was gradually deemphasized. At the same time, the North Korean leadership began to magnify *silhak* (Practical learning) in the following way:

Feudal historians sought to (use history) in solidifying their system of rule by turning Korea into a small China. ... Yi Ik argued against such tendencies of *sadae*, and fought doctrinaire scholars along with *sadae* ideology. During this time (late Joseon), scholarships on history and geography by *silhak* scholars displayed new tendencies that cannot be found in conventional feudal historians. (Ryeoksa yeonguso godae mit jungsesa yeongusil 1958:9).

While positive appraisal of *silhak* on the one hand is a continuation of tradition, the tradition that they sought to inherit reflected the contemporary trends that sought to escape from the Soviet influence. After the new Soviet leadership denounced Stalin's cult of personality in the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, North Korea's relationship with the Soviet Union began to sour. As the North Korean leadership sought to succeed Stalinism (which had been based on a cult of personality), it could not bode well with the new Soviet leadership that began to criticize that approach.

Based on Marxism-Leninism, the North Korea of the 1950s highly appraised the advanced and scientific characteristics of newer trends such as *silhak* in criticizing the contradictions and negative effects of Confucianism. However, as Juche ideology intensified into Kim Il Sung-ism, *silhak* was repudiated as Neo-Confucianism became re-resurrected.

The North Korean Juche Ideology and Resurrection of Confucianism

Kim Il Sung, in the midst of a power struggle to consolidate his political position against his rivals in North Korea, argued for the establishment of Juche. In doing so, Kim established the Juche ideology, which developed

in three phases (the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s) since its first conceptual promulgation in the 1950s.

The 1950s, its first phase, was a period in which the issue of Juche was brought up in order to procure internal independence. Juche was presented as an antithesis of traditional *sadae* (worship of the great) and blind imitation of the Soviet Union. While establishment of Juche clearly had a tint of anti-foreignism in its language, its execution was not a direct confrontation against China and the Soviet Union (especially the Soviet Union), but against internal elements who had support from foreign powers in order to secure independence.

By the 1960s, which can be seen as the second stage, the establishment of Juche expanded to the issue of securing independence for the Korean Workers Party and the North Korean regime. This movement was conceptualized as Juche ideology. In other words, Juche ideology was posited as a way of securing independence for both the party and the state. By the late 1960s, Juche ideology went through a process of ideological systemization that propelled it as a revolutionary ideology of the Korean Workers Party that creatively applied Marx-Leninism. Also from the late 1960s, Juche ideology expanded into the realms of philosophy and historical perspectives.

By the 1970s, in its final stage, Juche ideology assumed a fully self-completing logical structure. As a result, Juche ideology was proclaimed as a whole ideology with an ideology, theory, and methodology of its own, and it was finally synthesized in 1982 by Kim Jung Il's work *Juchesasang e daehayeo*. From this point on, Juche ideology transformed itself from a mere response to and a way of achieving independence vis-à-vis foreign powers into a structural logic dominating the lives of a group of humanity (Yi 2000:140-141).

North Korea's historical view also changed along with the developmental stages of Juche ideology, with differences evident in published historical works. Into the 1950s, following the liberation, Kim Il Sung's grip on power was relatively weak and leftist intellectuals such as Choe Changik and Baek Namun were influential. Therefore, historical research relied on nationalism based on historical materialism of Marxism as the guiding principle of history writing. However, Choe Changik and Baek Namun were eliminated in the power struggles during the period from the late 1950s into the late 1960s, allowing the addition of anti-Japanese military resistance centered on

Kim Il Sung as the dominant tradition of Joseon revolution in North Korea's materialist view of history.

The 1963 celebration of the August 15th liberation in North Korea was held in Hyesan, one of the sites at which anti-Korean military resistance occurred. Kim Il Sung was in attendance. The celebration sought to emphasize state independence as well as injecting confidence into the masses. From the late 1960s, the basis of all views of history was beginning to be Juche ideology (Chung 2004:1172-1173).

By the late 1960s, Juche ideology moved beyond the form of "creative application of Marxism-Leninism in Korea" realities and actualized as the cult worship of Kim Il Sung (Yi 2000:161-164). The cult of personality, heavily criticized in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, was revived in North Korea. In midst of all this, the promotion of *silhak* scholars, leaders of righteous armies, and historical war heroes such as Yi Sunsin and Gang Gamchan, became taboo. Academic journals that led the fields of traditional culture and historical research such as *Ryeoksa gwahak* and *Gogo minsok* were suspended in 1967. It is important to note that those ideologies and personalities had, at least partially, suited the ideological agendas of the regime during the early years of North Korea. From this point on, however, North Korean scholars could not go further back than the time of anti-Japanese resistance to locate exemplary models for the behavior of North Korean people.

Therefore, widespread critique of traditional culture and history by the North Korean leadership in 1967 intensified the imbalance of North Korean academia regards to the Korean national culture and shot down the nationalistic tendencies of Juche ideology. Such trends continued into the 1980s, during which period the leader became the central element of Juche ideology. Based on the thesis of fusion of the leader and the people, "revolutionary leadership" took on the dominant role within the discourse of Juche ideology (Yi 2000:203-208).

While North Korea at first announced a departure from tradition, traditional values and its cultural elements reemerged as time went on. First, while leaders of early North Korea argued for the anti-traditionalist acceptance of Marxism-Leninism, a complete break with tradition was impossible from the start (Seo 1994:4). Furthermore, this forced rupture caused resentment among the populace. There eventually arose a need to

recycle traditional ideology for the strengthening of the socialist regime. Furthermore, traditional ideology such as Confucianism was almost a necessity for hereditary succession as was the case in North Korea. I now want to examine how Confucianism, once-criticized idealism, was resurrected within Juche ideology.

It is argued in North Korea that “the worldview of Juche directly confronts the reactionary philosophy of the bourgeoisie that seeks to research the people’s internal conditions. In doing so, as a principle, it rejects contemporary bourgeoisie currents of philosophy that sees penetrating into the people’s experiences, emotions and conditions as the mission” (Bak 1977:15). However, it is evident that abandoning of once-emphasized Marxism-Leninism was accompanied by a return to researching the people’s internal conditions—similar to the direction taken by bourgeois philosophy and Confucianism.

In North Korea’s Juche ideology, “Man is regarded as the highest of all the elements that make up the universe. Humans are seen as the inevitable outcome of the logic of continuous development of matter” (Bak 1977:15). After arguing for the position humanity occupies in the universe, it argues the following:

As material beings, humans also form a part of the material world. They also have many common features that a material being has. Especially as organic and live beings, humans have a lot of common features with animals. However, commonalities with the animals do not explain the position humans occupy in the material world. Above all, humans came to occupy the highest position in the material world over the animal world by becoming a social being. (Bak 1977:15)

As can be seen from above, Juche ideology argues that “the most fundamental condition of humanity is not the fact that they are living biological entities, but that they are independent social beings,” and that “those without such independence do not exist as a social entities.” “Men exist as the most powerful in the world only with independence and creativity,” and “an independent mind and creative capability are necessary in order to carry out independent and creative activities” (Kim 1980:35-38).

This logic can also be seen in the understanding of humanity by Neo-Confucianism, the very ideology which was criticized as feudal in

North Korea. In other words, Neo-Confucian perspective sees humans as a biological entity with animal-like features as well as ethical features that distinguish them from other animals (Yi 1982:208). Zhu Xi has claimed the same in saying, “Men and other matters are likewise born into the world. Looking at *gi* (energy), there seems to be no difference between them. Looking at *yi* (morals), however, the fact that men are born with human virtues differentiates them from other matters. Humanity does not have evil characteristics, making men the lord of all creation.” In other words, while men have virtuous characteristics, other animals only have some of them (Yi 1982:208).

While Juche ideology saw the source of difference between men and animals as ideological consciousness, Neo-Confucianism sees it as moral consciousness. In the end, both ideological consciousness and moral consciousness are identical in the sense that they are mental instead of material.

On the other hand, “Juche’s outlook on nature views and reforms all natural phenomena from a man-centered perspective” (Ha 1988:72-73). Humans are “the master of nature” due to their independent and creative powers, and they furthermore are “the master of society” (Kim 1986:45-47).

Going further, in Juche ideology, “independence is vital for humans as social beings, and such vitality refers to the sociopolitical.” “Along with physical lives, people have sociopolitical lives. If physical life refers to life as a biological being, sociopolitical life refers to life as a social being” (Kim 1982:10). This way, the emphasis is placed upon the dignity of human beings as spiritual beings over humans as material beings. Distinguished from other animals by the possession of sociopolitical life, men need to carry out sociopolitical activities.

Furthermore, “the society, distinguishable from nature as a special realm of its own, has characteristics of its own. Of course, society also belongs to the material world. In other words, while society also exists on its own as a material world regardless of the opinions of humans, society is made of human beings who cannot exist without others. That is the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes society from nature.” “Human lives cannot be imagined without social relations. Human lives and activities are not only creating and using of material and mental wealth, but also establishing and developing social relations. Such common activities can be found among animals. However, those of animals are merely and only

based on biological traits without a clearly defined mission uniting them. Humans, however, establish social relations and carry out activities with a clearly-defined mission” (Go 1989:164-167).

It states in addition, “the most fundamental feature of society is that human beings establish and develop social relations as they live and act. Social relations refer to the totality of sociopolitical, cultural, ideological, and familial relationships people develop as they carry out the society-reforming labor, political, and cultural activities (Joseon Rodongdang Chulpansa 1984:311). What can be revealed from this is that “society” and “social relations” as defined here include far more elements of human mentality. It also emphasizes the “mission” of the society as a distinguishing point between humans and animals.

As we have seen, the value of dignity for human beings in North Korea is found in their activities in the society, and such beliefs translate into the Juche view of history. Treating the “sociopolitical organism” as a biological entity, it recognizes “the leader as the brain of the masses as well as the top leader of revolution.” “The party of the working class is the commanding headquarters of the revolution that carries out the will of the leader as well as the heart of the society that makes the whole society breathe and move according to the will of the leader” (Ju, Yi and Ju 1994:248). Such logic recycles that of Yi Hwang, a Joseon scholar whom the North Korean regime once labeled as backward and feudal. Yi Hwang wrote, “The monarch is the head of a state, officials are his stomach and chest, and commoners are his eyes and ears” (Ju, Yi and Ju 1994:248; Chung 1996:136-137). As Juche ideology intensified, it was argued that “the issue of loyalty and filial piety to the party and the leader is the most fundamental question in carrying out the historical process of revolution of the working class.” “In a sociopolitical organism that united the leader, party, and people into one, the relationships between the leader, warriors, party, and the people are that of trust, loyalty, love and filial piety” (An 1997:244). The reason behind Kim Il Sung’s decision to opt for traditional Confucianism and to embrace it into Juche ideology was to strengthen the planned hereditary succession to his son, starting from the 1970s.

Conclusion

As we have examined above, certain aspects of Korean traditional political culture were invoked as the new political culture based on socialist ideology was institutionalized in North Korea. Such example can be seen in the characteristics of dictatorial authoritarianism. While communist ideology certainly must have influenced North Korean political culture to become authoritarian, traditional Confucianism also caused a synergetic effect. While similar examples to the one-man dictatorship and cult of personality of Kim Il Sung can be found in the cases of Stalin and Mao Zedong, the attempt at hereditary succession in politics can only be found in North Korea. While communist ideology is openly against a feudal status system, the fact that North Korea is rationalizing the succession of Kim Jung Il using the logic of hereditary blood succession makes North Korea a noticeable case of feudal succession. The fact that dynastic hereditary succession took place in North Korea is proof that the dictatorial authoritarian political system is naturalizing.

Kim Il Sung emphasized his materialist interpretation of history in saying, “In carrying out our revolutionary struggle and the construction mission, we must not look at problems from an mentalist and unscientific point of view, but from that of scientific materialism” (Joseon Rodongdang Chulpansa 1985:52). However, the core focus of Kim Il Sung’s materialism was justification of revolutionary tradition, worship of the leader, and hereditary succession of the house of Kim as something inevitable. And the fact that such posited inevitability does not allow for doubt or refutation is reminiscent of traditional Confucianism. In this sense, North Korea’s Juche ideology revived Confucianism in a most conventional and mystical way. In this sense, socialism can be seen as an ideology with the strongest affinity for a pre-modern mentality.

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Abstract

While Juche ideology, emblematic of socialism in North Korea, was first formed based on Marxist-Leninism, it was gradually infused with the traditional Korean thought of Confucianism as the North Korean regime, as well as the personal power of Kim Il Sung, stabilized on a firm footing. As a result, socialism in North Korea began to transform in its own ways.

The traditional Confucianism of the five-hundred-year Joseon Dynasty, particularly the ethics of the Three Bonds and Five Relationships, impacted all aspects of Korean lives in an immeasurable ways. This tradition, however, was severely criticized by the new twentieth century intellectuals who were exposed to new Western thoughts and academic trends during the Japanese colonial period. The North Korean regime, which, after liberation, adopted Marxist-Leninism as the founding ideology of the regime, severely criticized and denied traditional Confucianism as a pre-modern and feudal ideology based on anachronistic idealism. Korean Confucianism, initially abandoned by the North Korean regime in its formative years, however, was resurrected in Juche ideology in order to justify the dictatorial regime of Kim Il Sung.

In this article, I sought to closely follow the process of denial-to-resurrection of Korean Confucianism in great detail. Starting with the discourses of denial produced by reformist intellectuals of the colonial period such as Yun Chiho and Yi Gwangsu, I move on to the praise of Soviet-style socialism and concomitant erasure of traditional Confucianism by the likes of Baek Namun during the early years of the North Korean regime, and finish with the processes of resurrection of Confucianism during the 1970s and 1980s as the Juche ideology became formalized and stabilized.

North Korea's Juche ideology is a resurrection of Confucianism in a mystical way, and socialism in North Korea therefore can be seen as an ideology with a strong mutual affinity with pre-modern ideologies.

Keywords: modernity, socialism in North Korea, Juche ideology, Confucianism, resurrection of Confucianism

