

Peering Behind the Curtain on the Question of Political Religion in the DPRK

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The ideological setting of the DPRK is occasionally labelled enigmatic or mysterious by academics and much more often, journalists of the popular media. Analysts have often described the ideological setting in the DPRK as religious¹. It comes closer to fitting the profile for *political* religion.²

Despite claims by the state itself, the ideological doctrine and its presentation in the DPRK cannot be considered completely original. This lack of originality does not discredit its classification as a political religion. Most political religions do in fact fall short of being completely original. In the Italian example, concepts of morality and rituals surrounding the *Duce*, Mussolini often exhibited a notably Catholic colouring.³ The North Korean state is no exception: the ideology is closely related to more nationalist elements of Tonghak/ Cheondogyo and Christianity; terminology and imagery have Christian undertones; legitimacy and morality are maintained via traditional Neo-Confucian principles.⁴ It is impossible to completely ignore spiritual beliefs, but in order to gain a better understanding of where an ideology such as that of the North Korean state comes from, we can take a look at aspects of its ideological predecessors. In order to find out where concepts of morality and overall religiosity come from, the maelstrom of religious ideas present before and during the Japanese occupation requires further investigation.

¹ Some argue that the regime is actively trying to replace Christianity: Thomas J. Belke, *Juche: A Christian Study of North Korea's State Religion* Bartlesville Oklahoma: Living Sacrifice Books, 1999 or Cho Eun-sik "The Encounter Between the Juche Idea and Christianity" *Mission Studies* Vol 19 no 1 2002 pp 82-105

² Emilio Gentile gives us a definition that gives sufficient attention to the functionalist aspects of what might be considered a political religion: "Modern political movements are transformed into secular religions when they: (a) define the meaning of life and ultimate ends of human existence; (b) formalize the commandments of a public ethic to which all members of these movement must adhere; and (c) give utter importance to the mythical and symbolic dramatization in their interpretation of history and reality, thus creating their own 'sacred history', embodied in the nation, the state or the party, and tied to the existence of a 'chosen people', which were glorified as the regenerating force of all mankind." By Gentile's example the DPRK is a venerable poster child for political religion. Juche based solely on the books allegedly produced by Kim Jong-il may not fit the definition proposed by Gentile. Just as a Christian bible requires human institutions rooted in ritual and belief to reinforce its doctrine so too do political religions consist of more than what can be found in primary ideological canon. Upon further examination of various forms of state media and education, upholding the argument that the DPRK is in fact fostering a political religion gains a considerable amount of ground. Emilio Gentile, *Political religion: a concept and its critics- a critical survey* *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:1 2005, 19-32 pg 30

³ Emilio Gentile, "Fascism as Political Religion". *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 25 #2/3 May-June 1990 pp229-251 pg 230

⁴ John Jorgensen has already suggested a number of similarities between Buddhist philosophies and Juche in "North Korea's Rediscovery of Tan'gun" *Korea Observer* vol 27 no 2 Summer 1996 pp 273-306 pg 287

Religion in Korea

Confucianism can be considered one of the most historically influential philosophies in Northeast Asia. First introduced to Korea in the late 14th century later versions of Neo-Confucianism would become synonymous with the Joseon dynasty's state ideology.⁵ Neo-Confucianism, inspired by the Chinese philosopher Chu Hsi (1130-1200) was adapted to the Korean conditions by Yi Hwang, penname Toe-gye (1501-1570). Toe-gye's Neo-Confucianism called for self-cultivation of the ruling classes and elites to bring about a more harmonious society.⁶ If people in society knew their place there would be less social friction. Morality was defined through a series of five relationships (*o ryeon*).⁷

Neo-Confucianism focused primarily on the cultivation of the elites but also called for the ruling class to remember the concept of *minbon* (民本), or considering common people the foundation of society. Wang Yang-ming's (王陽明) later interpretation of the *daxue* (great learning, 大學), grew in popularity in the latter part of the Joseon dynasty. Wang insisted that all members of society, rather than simply the elite and ruling classes, adhere to Confucian morality as outlined in the *daxue*.⁸ Through self-cultivation any individual could become a *gunja* (君子), one of refined moral character comparable to the idea of the gentleman in the traditional Anglo-European interpretation.

Throughout the Joseon dynasty, Confucianism presented a series of 'civilizing' credentials that legitimized the rule of the elite literati.⁹ At the same time, efforts to reduce the influence of popular religious practices like Shamanism were ineffective as such practices were still widespread by the end of the dynasty.¹⁰ The animist traditions merged from pre-Confucian Korea had merged with Neo-Confucian ideals and created an originally Korean strain of Neo-Confucianism.¹¹

Christianity and Protestantism came to Korea in numerous waves and were received with varying results throughout their history on the peninsula. Christianity grew to a formidable number of adherents by the March 1st movement of 1919 and began to

⁵ Boudewijn Walraven "Popular Religion in Confucianized Society" in Jahyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler, eds. *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999 pg 160

⁶ Yi Tae-jin *The Dynamics of Confucianism and Modernization in Korean History* New York: Cornell University Press 2007 pg 298

⁷ Between father and son there should be affection, between husband and wife there should be attention to their separate functions, between old and young there should be proper order, between ruler and minister there should be righteousness, between friend and friend there should be faithfulness Andrea Matles Savada, ed. *North Korea: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993 at <http://countrystudies.us/north-korea/>

⁸ Yi Tae-jin *The Dynamics of Confucianism and Modernization in Korean History* New York: Cornell University Press 2007 pg 298

⁹ Boudewijn Walraven "Popular Religion in Confucianized Society" in Jahyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler, eds. *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999 pg 161

¹⁰ Boudewijn Walraven "Popular Religion in Confucianized Society" in Jahyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler, eds. *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999 pg 162

¹¹ Hongkyung Kim, "A Party for the Spirits: Ritual Practice in Confucianism" in Robert Buswell eds. *Religions of Korea in Practice* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 pp 163-176

take on more nationalistic causes through the efforts of individuals such as Yun Chi-ho, Seo Jae-pil, An Chang-ho, and Cho Man-shik. Referred to by Kenneth M. Wells as self-reconstructionists, they stressed cultivation of individual morality in order to generate a stronger and more prosperous society.

Tonghak (eastern learning), later known as Cheondogyo (religion of the heavenly way) was founded by the middle-class son of an aristocrat (*chungin*) Choe Che-u, known more commonly in later years as *Taeshinsa* (大神師) or *Suun*. According to the Cheondogyo 'bible' (*dongkyeong daejeon*) in 1860 *Suun*, troubled by the arrival of religious foreigners in Korea, began to study their religion.¹² After four months *Suun* fell ill, deep in meditation, he received a vision from Sangchae (God) informing him to heal the people through the use of a special etching.¹³

Tonghak is historically best known for its role in the Peasants Uprising of 1894 (also known as the Kabo Rebellion, or Tonghak Rebellion). Because of doctrinal similarities between Christianity and Tonghak, the Tonghaks were threatened under an increasingly hostile attitude of the Taewongun and the Queen Min towards Christianity. The first two leaders were executed by the government in 1864 and 1898 respectively. The third leader, known as the *Seongsa*, helped codify some of the more ambiguous doctrine within the Cheondogyo faith and set the stage for a more political movement.

Tonghak and Cheondoist influence

In 1911 the third leader of Cheondogyo, Son Pyeong-hui, known as the *Seongsa*, added two additional administrative organs to the constitution aimed at standardizing Cheondoist doctrine, one being a central office of inspection and control (*daejeongsa*) and an office in charge of all spiritual affairs (*dosasil*).

For our purposes, his most significant contribution is found in a declaration of principles that Cheondoists were expected to follow. The *Seongsa* declared that: 1) Man and God are one, *innaecheon*; 2) mind and matter stem from spiritual motivation *seongsin ssangjeon*; 3) religion and politics should be consistent with one another *kyojeong ilchi*; 4) spiritual energy is timeless and transcendental to future generations *seongyeong chulsseseol*; 5) man should live according to principles rather than by materialism *isin hwanseong*; 6) the doctrine of Cheondogyo should be standardized *kumo ilchi*; 7) faiths of the world should be united *sinang tongil*; 8) and that religion can only truly be defined by one who has developed a highly refined personality which is an integrated combination of the principles of knowledge, love, and will *cheonggyo eui cheongeui*.¹⁴

Due to its nationalistic roots and role in what can be considered a proletarian uprising, Tonghak/ Cheondogyo enjoys favor in the histories of the DPRK. Although Kim Il-

¹² *Dongkyeong taejeon* (primary doctrinal source of Cheondogyo: 'Bible of the Cheondogyo') English Translation in Charles Allen Clark, *Religions of Old Korea* Seoul Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1961 pg 260

¹³ *Ibid* pg 261

¹⁴ Cheondogyo Chang Keon Sa. Pt. III pp 66-69 in Benjamin Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1964 pp 64-66:

sung would never admit to personally believing in the religion he does not deny its influence in the formation of Juche. “While establishing the Juche–orientated line of our revolution, naturally I displayed interest in different established theories and movements and positively recognized the position and role of Chondoism as a national religion.”¹⁵ Cheondogyo grew as a religious movement under the Japanese occupation. The aftermath of the 1919 March 1st uprising saw the publication of a Cheondoist journal *Kaebyeok*. The 2006 October issue of *Korea Today* tells us that Kim Il-sung “...met the Chondoists and read the journal. After reading, he used to debate with his comrades on its articles.”¹⁶ This may or may not be true, but the state has authorized its publication and it reminds us that Cheondogyo was being taken seriously by numerous other individuals who would have been around during the formation of the DPRK.

An obvious example of Cheondogyo’s contribution to the DPRK is presented by numerous publications of North Korean media in which the Great Leader’s lifelong motto of *imineuicheon*, “the people are heaven” which is advertised as evidence of his love for the people.¹⁷¹⁸ Later versions of the Cheondoist concept of *innaecheon*, the anthropomorphic idea that man and God/ the Universe are in fact one and the same, bears a close resemblance to the DPRK’s *imineuicheon*.¹⁹ As a writer for the Cheondogyo Central Headquarters and close adviser to the *Seongsa*, Yi Ton-hwa’s 1924 assessment of *innaecheon* begins to sound related to north Korea ideology: “*In nae ch’ŏn* was conceived in order to make this world a paradise. But this does not mean that *in nae ch’ŏn* was created because the world had already become a paradise. That is to say, man has the quality to be a God, and the present world has the quality to be a paradise.”²⁰ *Innaecheon*, like Juche, is destined to help society bring about its own teleological transformation.

Yi continues his description of *innaecheon* by pointing out shortcomings in Marxian thought in that “he (Marx) knew only the natural man and did not know the creative man which is deeply hidden in the natural man.”²¹ This coincides with the idea that Juche has developed Marx’s ideas a step further by defining man’s position in the world, specifically by pointing out attributes of independence, creativity, and consciousness that need to be developed in order to set him apart from other biological organisms.²²

¹⁵ Kim Il-Sung *Reminiscences* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1992 volume 5 chapter 15 section 5

¹⁶ “Cheondoist Journal *Kaebyeok*” *Korea Today* number 592, October 2006
<http://www.kcckp.net/en/periodic/todaykorea/index.php?contents+1633+2005-10+77+15>

¹⁷ The KCNA translates this statement as “the people are my God.”

¹⁸ See: Sin Eung-cheol “inminjeonggueonkeonseoleseo ifuk hashin uidaehan suryeongnim eui vulmyeonleui eobjeok” *Rodong Sinmun* July 12 1997; January 1, 2008, or *KCNA* January 19, 2008; September 14, 2007; July 8, 2006; September 8, 2004; July 29, 2003; April 11, 2002; September 2, 2000; April 15, 2000; November 17, 1999; October 5, 1999; June 16, 1999; May 20, 1999; April 28, 1999; September 17, 1998; April 21, 1998;

¹⁹ See the Cheondoist Journal *Kaebyeok*, which published a series of articles entitled “innaecheoneui yeongu” (Researching Innaecheon) throughout the early 1920s.

²⁰ Yi Ton-hwa *Innaecheoneui yoewi* (Essentials of Innaecheon), Seoul: Cheondogyo Central Headquarters, 1924 pp 199-201 in Benjamin Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1964 pp 10-11

²¹ *Ibid* pg 11

²² Kim Jong-il “On the Juche Idea” in Kim Jong-il *On the Juche Philosophy* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002 pp 25-27

The third principle introduced by the *Seongsa, Kyojeong Ilchi* (Consistency of Religion and Politics) arguing that morality of the individual and political affairs are interwoven, is related to the ideology in the DPRK that draws no distinction between man's morality in life and his political life. Given that morality helps to dictate what decisions should be made in daily life, "The objective of this historic cause is to complete our revolution which has developed and triumphed under the banner of Juche idea. In order to realize this cause, all Party members and working people should clearly understand the truth of the Juche idea, and think and act strictly in accordance with its requirements."²³

The correct version of morality in the DPRK can be summarized as adhering to a collectivist mentality and revering the leadership.²⁴ In order to maintain the development of Socialism, the Party should offer the people moral and political incentives above materialistic equivalents, "...neglecting the political and moral incentive and placing the main emphasis on the material incentive runs counter to the essential character of socialist society. This is a very dangerous and harmful tendency."²⁵ The ultimate achievement of unity in the DPRK is a push to synthesise politics and ideology in the minds of its citizenry.

The fourth principle, *Seongyeong Julsesseol* (transmigration of the spirit), the idea that spiritual experiences of ancestors can be felt by later individuals and fostering the concepts that society is eternally interconnected is comparable to DPRK's ideas concerning the socio-political organism. Kim Jong-il argues that a person's life is finite, yet the socio-political organism is immortal.²⁶ Kenneth M. Wells and Shin Eun-hee expand upon the notion of the socio-political body as an element of the religious dimensions of Juche.²⁷

The socio-political life can be seen as man's role in society. Various tissue cells combine to form a body, just as man contributes his individual self to the greater social-political organism. "The Juche idea also newly clarified the essence and the value of a human being's life. When a human being is regarded as an organic body, his life means a physical life. However, he is not a being who only leads a physical life. The Juche idea indicated, for the first time in history, that a man/ woman has a socio-political life, as well as a physical life. Physical life is a man/ woman's life as a social being. Socio-political life is the life which is unique to a human being as a social being."²⁸ The *Seongsa's* version of Cheondogyo sees that man's spirit, through

²³ Kim Jong-il "On the Juche Idea" in Kim Jong-il *On the Juche Philosophy* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002 pg 19

²⁴ Konrad Mathesius "Religion and Ideology in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" The Australian National University, MA Thesis 2008

²⁵ Kim Jong-il "On the Juche Idea" in Kim Jong-il *On the Juche Philosophy* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002 pg 89

²⁶ Kim Jong-il "On Some Problems of Education in the Juche Idea" in Kim Jong-il *On Carrying Forward the Juche Idea* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995 pg 215

²⁷ See: Kenneth M. Wells "The Place of Religion in North Korean Ideology" *British Association for Korean Studies* Volume 9 2004 and Shin Eun-hee "The Socio-Political Organism: the religious dimensions of Juche philosophy" in Robert Buswell eds. *Religions of Korea in Practice* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 pp 517-530

²⁸ Kim Jong-il *Socialism is a Science* in Shin Eun-hee "The Sociopolitical Organism: the religious dimensions of Juche philosophy" Robert Buswell ed., *Religions of Korea in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 pp 517-530 pg 528

his endeavours and interactions with society are everlasting. Cheondogyo refers to a *ki* (a Neo-Confucian concept that can vaguely be described as the combination of mental and physical energy) that binds everything in the universe, and followers are encouraged to “act for the common good rather than seek our own individual selfish interest.”²⁹ The immediate functional task of these ideas is to promote the idea that, despite a lack of immediate compensation, individuals should contribute to the collective. Embracing collectivism translates as giving in to something that is worthwhile and will ultimately contribute to both the individual and society as a whole.

The concept of the socio-political organism in the DPRK tackles the ambiguities of death by offering quasi-immortality through oneness with the Body. Secondly it serves to give citizens a sense of identity and belonging to something which will eventually result in the completion of the revolution and construction and the subsequent realization of an earthly paradise.

The fifth principle *Isin Hwansǒng* (Sacrifice of the Physical for the Spiritual), maintaining man should live by principles rather than his physical body alone and it is the human ability to have principles that sets us apart from other animals, is related to later interpretations of the Juche ideology in which man, without principles is simply an animal.³⁰

Sinang T’ongil (Unity of Faith) is a popular concept in new religious movements the use of which cannot solely be accredited to Cheondogyo. Juche, although including the proviso that things be done according to the actual circumstances of the individual country, in its wildest dreams hopes to become an immortal truth under which the oppressed people of the world unite. Christian self-reconstructionists can be accredited with similar ideas of self-cultivation and an eventual unification of mankind based on principles. The Cheondogyo version sees that when the world is filled with *sinseon* (the enlightened) the world will undergo a Great Transformation (*Kaebyeok*) and become a *seongyong* (realm of immortals).³¹

The remaining principles of Cheondogyo (2) mind and matter stem from spiritual motivation *seongsin ssangjeon*; 6) the doctrine of Cheondogyo should be standardized *kumo ilchi*; 7) faiths of the world should be united *sinang tongil*; 8) and that religion can only truly be defined by one who has developed a highly refined personality *cheonggyo eui cheongeui*) do not exhibit such a notable similarity with the current ideology in the DPRK. The above assessment concerning similarities between Cheondogyo and Juche does face a number of difficulties.

Firstly, the similarity between Korean Christianity and Cheondogyo is apparent. An Chang-ho also promoted Pauline body metaphors.³² These ideas as representative to

²⁹ Don Baker “The Great Transformation” in Robert Buswell ed *Religions of Korea in Practice* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 pg 451

³⁰ Kim Jong-il “On the Juche Idea” in Kim Jong-il *On the Juche Philosophy* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002 pg 25

³¹ Don Baker “The Great Transformation” in Robert Buswell ed *Religions of Korea in Practice* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 pg 454

³² An Chang-ho ‘*Tongpoege kohaneun keul*’ in Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation*. Sydney: Allen & Urwin Pty Ltd 1990 pg 124

aggregate society may well have been inspired directly or indirectly from Cheondoist doctrine or vice-versa. Furthermore, millenarian or teleological discourse was popular in many religious and nationalist circles under Japanese colonial rule.

Thus there are some overlapping characteristics between Cheondogyo and Juche. It is still difficult to tell whether or not these ideas were translated between Cheondoist groups and the founders of the DPRK, or if they were later rediscovered by Juche theorists trying to put together new ideas. What is more likely is that Cheondoist thought during the 20s and 30s, having accepted the idea that politics and faith are interconnected, was irresistibly drawn into the realm of a more general and over-arching nationalist trend. Numerous schisms that occurred within the faith throughout its existence are evidence of the inevitable mixing of religion and politics under the circumstances facing Koreans at the time.

Christian Influence

There exists the potential for Christian influence via Kim Il-sung's mother, Kang Pan-seok. She was a dedicated Christian and Christians otherwise largely contributed to social and political movements throughout the time period in which Kim Il-sung grew up (born 1912). Liberation and the subsequent division of Korea flipped religious and political demographics on its head; southern areas harboured larger amounts of pro-communists than the northern half which was home to the majority of Korea's Christians. Cho Man-shik, Yun Chi-ho, Yi Kwang-su, and An Chang-ho were all either directly from, or spent a good deal of time in, the northern part of the Peninsula. By the late 40s, Cho Man-shik's popular support was rooted in the north and would have laid the groundwork for his ascension to leadership in the new government were it not for his abject refusal to accept a trusteeship by any nation over Korea. Cho was imprisoned and possibly executed in Soviet camps circa 1946, making Kim Il-sung the new front runner for the leadership.

The choice of words that is associated with the leadership in numerous articles harbours rather obvious connections to Christianity. Articles in the *Rodong Sinmun* (the mouthpiece of the Korean Worker's Party) often refer to the Generals as "saints": "(Kim Jong-il) is indeed the great saint of revolution who gives ineffable affection to those once he met and blooms their life."³³ Unblushingly, the father receives an even higher status, "Kim Il Sung is the most outstanding thinker and theoretician produced by the 20th century and the master of leadership who performed such exploits as winning one victory after another and a great revolutionary saint in the 20th century possessed of extraordinary personality and charisma that fascinated all the people."³⁴ In the Korean version of the text, *seongin*, or saint, is not exactly the same prefix given to Christian saints in the Bible *seongdo*. However, other major religions of Korea do not use the word *seongin* when addressing enlightened individuals in their texts.³⁵ Further references to the leadership reveal more in terms of the utilization of honorifics. In a 1997 editorial, Kim Jong-il's birth is referred to as a *tansaeng*, a

³³ Seung Jae-sun, Pak Nam-jin "Uri inmineun hyeongmyeongjeok insaenggwaneul chejilhwahan uidaehan inmin ida" *Rodong Sinmun*, Dec 2, 1997 (KCNA translation)

³⁴ "Sun's Day Observed" *Rodong Sinmun* April 15, 2001, KCNA online database: <http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-k.htm>

³⁵ Cheondogyo reserves the title of *Daesinsa* and *Sinsa* for its historically influential leaders. Buddhist acolytes are referred to as *sami*. Confucian scholars are known as *dosan*.

Korean word that can be used in reference to the birth of Jesus, but is more common in reference to a revered social figure.³⁶

Having previously established the fact that political religions are somewhat confined to the imagery of pre-existing religious entities it is not surprising that the DPRK would almost involuntarily lean towards the incorporation of some Christian imagery in the DPRK. Use of Christian terminology is visible in public life as well as in reference to the leadership. Well's recalls an account of his visit to a factory modeled after the Taean Factory model. "To one side of this chart, my eye was caught by this diagram of the factory Party Committee structure, in which the political, administrative, and technical divisions, headed by the Party Secretary, Manager, and Engineer, were called a Trinity."³⁷ The decision to incorporate Christian terminology exhibits the willingness or of the DPRK to follow Christian methods of apotheosis in exalting its Leaders. Although there is limited evidence that the DPRK's leadership is actively trying to replace Christianity with a state religion, the ambiguity alone cannot completely rule out this explanation.

Under Japanese oppression, other nationalists began working within areas they might be able to influence, such as the colonial economy. Cho Man-shik was a Protestant self-reconstructionist in his ideas concerning the necessity of people to take on moral reform before expecting social evolution. At the same time, he was arguably more politically inclined than some of his peers, exhibited by his support for the March 1st Movement. His main focus was, however, economic. A self-sufficient economy was considered to be one of the prerequisites of establishing an independent state. In an effort to curtail Japanese intrusion into Korean affairs, Cho founded the Korean Products Promotion Society (*joseon mulsan changnyeohoe*, KPPS) in 1922. As the name suggests, the Society was based around the principle of supporting indigenous businesses over their foreign counterparts which would ideally provide the foundation for national legitimacy and most importantly, self-sufficiency.³⁸

Another leading Christian nationalist whose work may have influenced ideological constructionists in the DPRK was An Chang-ho, penname Tosan. Kim Il-sung claims to have sat in on a speech of An Chang-ho in February of 1927³⁹ shortly after An's return from the U.S. In his account, An's much anticipated arrival is met with an excited atmosphere in Jilin. He is welcomed by the locals and gives a lecture that focuses on perfecting the national character. Kim takes the opportunity to criticize Yi Kwangsu's *Theory of National Transformation* as well as An and others' ideas of non-resistance. Kim does however credit them with the creation of the KPPS (although not explicitly as a recognized organization): "They (modern intellectuals and leadership of the nationalist movement) launched a nationwide campaign to use home-made goods under the slogan, 'Let us live on our own!' Their purpose was to pave the way to economic self-sufficiency."⁴⁰

³⁶ "haneul cheoreom midgo samnida." *Rodong Sinmun*, Feb 15, 1997

³⁷ Kenneth M. Wells, "The Place of Religion in North Korean Ideology." *British Association for Korean Studies* Volume 9 2004

³⁸ Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation*. Sydney: Allen & Urwin Pty Ltd 1990 pg 138

³⁹ Kim would have been just shy of 15 years old

⁴⁰ Kim Il-sung, *Reminiscences: with the century*. Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House 1992 pg 298

The turning point in the lecture comes when Kim eventually becomes so frustrated with An's criticism of the Korean character that he passes a note to the speaker with a few questions. Kim asks: "Do you think it will be possible for the nation to cultivate its strength by developing industry and education when the whole country is in the hands of the Japanese imperialists? Second, why do you say that our nation is at the lowest level of spiritual cultivation? Third, you had in mind the United States or Britain when you referred to major powers; should we follow their example and will we be able to achieve independence with their 'aid'?"⁴¹ An is apparently overwhelmed by the young Kim's inquiry and stumbles out of the room.

The questions Kim introduced were things that An would have already confronted in his thoughts and writings by 1927. It is unlikely that Kim's questions would have thrown An Chang-ho off track to such an extent that would require him to make a hasty abandon. What is also unlikely is that An would have supported a turn to the United States or Britain for 'aid' as he had always been opposed to *sadae*. Perhaps he saw them as role models for a better society but by no means did he seek aid. In previous essays, An spoke of the distinction between the 'master' (*juin*) and the 'guest' (*yeoin*) as one who takes on the responsibilities of maintaining the household which was compatible to society and the nation. If a resident did not take care of his house then there would be no difference between himself and a guest. Similarly, Juche insists that the masses are responsible for the world around them, "The masses of the people are the masters of revolution and construction and the decisive factor in transforming nature and developing society."⁴² An also asked, if a people failed to take responsibility for their nation, did they really deserve independence and autonomy?⁴³ His reasons for criticising the Korean nation were well founded and even the DPRK has criticized the lack of spirit among Koreans under the Japanese Empire.

Kim's criticism of An is ironic. Two things are apparent in examining Kim's interpretation of 'reformist' ideas. Firstly, it is clear that these ideas existed and were circulated widely. Despite the limited official membership of societies like the KPPS, the ideas were disseminating among the general public. If Kim's account contains basic geographic truths, we can ascertain that knowledge of the KPPS or at least the popularity surrounding An Chang-ho reached as far as Jilin. Secondly, we know that Kim himself was exposed to these ideas such as self-reliance and self-sufficiency at least insofar as the economy was concerned. Even if Kim Il-sung himself never sat in on An's speech, we know that other founders of the DPRK would have been exposed to self-reconstructionist ideas. Yi Keung-no, who would later take part in the founding of the DPRK, wrote an article for the KPPS journal *Mulsan* in February 1930 explaining the concept of self-sufficiency (*jajak, jageup*). Self-sufficiency required the constant development of skills and technology, and meant being master of one's own and the nation's economy.⁴⁴ Yi gives us a true connection between

⁴¹ Kim Il-sung, *Reminiscences: with the century*. Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House 1992 pg 299

⁴² In the same account, Kim reminisces about Cho Man-shik's devout Korean-ness as something to be revered. Clearly, Cho's ability to bridge the gap between self-reconstructionists (known to Kim distastefully as 'reformists') and guerrillas is what makes him sought after on both sides of the border.

⁴³ Kim Jong-il "On the Juche Idea" in Kim Jong-il *On the Juche Philosophy* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002 pg 33

⁴⁴ An Tosan, "Dongpoege gohaneun keul: juinga yeoinga" in *An Tosan jeonseo* (jung) 1999 pp 5-7

⁴⁵ Yi Keungno, 'Jajak jageup eui boneui' *Mulsan* vol 1 no 2, February 1930 pp 12-14 in Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation*. Sydney: Allen & Urwin Pty Ltd 1990 pg 149, 201

Christian nationalists and the foundations of the DPRK's ideological and economic ideas.

Despite the harsh tone with which the histories of the DPRK refer to Christians in Korea,⁴⁶ throughout the formation of the DPRK's ideological backbone, the tannins of Christian nationalists continued to produce guiding ideas and principles that were allegedly original. The effects of the KPPS's application of economics as 'stewardship' and their drive for self-reliance as explained Yi's work on *jajak jageup* are clearly visible in terms of the economic philosophies of the present DPRK. As mentioned above An's ideas concerning the Pauline metaphor of social unity parallel with the idea in the DPRK in which the Leader assumes the role of the brain, the Party becomes the nervous system, and the people, the body. Juche itself refers to freedom of the individual as a bi-product of a society that moves and thinks in the same direction, therefore regarding movement out of step with the group as debilitating and accordingly selfish. An's interpretation is much the same. If not inspired directly from An's writings in *Tongwang*⁴⁷ the influence of the life-or-death perception to unity among society among Christian's and other nationalists is undeniable within the current DPRK ideology.

Confucian Foundations

Finally, ideas concerning the legitimacy of the leadership as well as definitions of what is morally acceptable are reinforced through Confucian concepts of morality.

By building up the leaderships credentials, he (Kim Il-sung/ Kim Jong-il) are unquestionably leaders of choice. The concept of infallibility is rooted in two areas: 1. the leadership truly loves his people. His intentions are advertised as being genuinely concerned with the welfare of the DPRK's citizens and thereby unquestionably just. 2. the leadership is also *fit* for rule through his scholarly aptitude. There is apparently no one more suitable for the role than the leaders themselves; there is logically no need for pluralism.

The state legitimizes the Kims' cults of personality by utilizing culturally familiar concepts of the family-state to show that the leadership is a paternal leader who loves the people. The hagiography of Kim can be traced back to as early as the 1940s. The novelist Han Sorya produced the first biography of Kim 'Our Sun' (*urieu daeyang*) in 1946.⁴⁸ Kim Jong-il is praised for his observance of filial piety toward the leader, and numerous 'heroes of the revolution' exhibit idealized moral traits of loyalty and collectivism.⁴⁹ As of the 1960s Kim Il-sung was associated with images of both

⁴⁶ In one example, missionaries are equated with American imperialists, the age-long enemies of Korea: "Those villains made Pyongyang a centre of missionary and cultural activity by which they tried to camouflage their aggression in Korea." In *The Mother of Korea* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978 pg 29

⁴⁷ the periodical of the *Tonguhoe* which had been established by Yi Kwang-su in Seoul in 1923 as the Korean arm of An Chang-ho's *Heungsadan*

⁴⁸ Charles K. Armstrong "Famillism, Socialism, and Political Religion in North Korea" in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* volume 6 number 3, pp 383-394, pg 387

⁴⁹ Examples of these heroes can be founding the stories of the young Jang Thae-hwa, who threw his body onto enemy machine guns to clear the way for the advance of the unit or Kil Yeong-jo a pilot who, rather than ejecting, died steering his failing plane away from the birthplace of Kim Jong-il. The

paternal and maternal love for the nation.⁵⁰ At times when Kim is considered the father figure, his first wife Kim Jong-suk, the Party, or the military may be referred to as the mother figure.⁵¹

Loyalty shown to the leader is the counterpart of his love unto the masses.⁵² The individuals are then responsible to contribute their share of loyalty in a relationship that resembles Confucian ideas of hierarchy and responsibility.

Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il have fostered unquestionable support and acceptance on the premise that they are intellectually superior to anyone else in the country. Kim Jong-il's hereditary ties to Kim Il-sung are often described as inconvenient. Had he not been the son of Kim Il-sung he would have nevertheless been fit to lead based on his own intelligence. This sort of idea is hardly original when juxtaposed with Sino-Korean histories. The concept of learned sage kings (*seongyong*) or scholastically refined instructor kings (leader-*gunja* 君子) who had attained an elevated morality based on their knowledge of Confucian classics and was thereby fit to rule was utilized by numerous rulers of Korea and China, most historically notable in the histories of King Sejong and the later King Cheongjo.

Similar to Cheongjo's trips outside the palace Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung have travelled thousands of kilometres throughout the course of their respective periods of leadership for the purposes of on-the-spot guidance (*hyeonji jido*). They are said to have travelled much more. For outsiders it is fascinating to hear that a man of state might have a better idea of how to cultivate rice than local farmers; however, technical, educational, industrial, agricultural, and many other kinds of advice have been given out by the leadership during their on-the-spot guidance tours.

The museum that accompanies the film studios on the outskirts of Pyongyang displays numerous scripts that have been personally corrected by the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il. In a moment of frustration the author asked if there were any other competent people living in Korea or if the Dear Leader had to do everything himself. The guide tactfully responded by explaining that there were other geniuses in Korea, but Kim Jong-il in particular was yet a step above them. He was a *cheonjae*, with a particular emphasis on *cheon* or heaven. Under him were *moricheoeun saram* (literally good-headed/ smart people) and finally *botong saram* (normal people)⁵³. The guide's interpretation may not be indicative of the aggregate population's ideas, but it is not difficult to at least suggest that guides meant to deal with nosey foreigners are taught to explain things in such a way.

former's statue can be found at the Liberation War Memorial in Pyongyang, the latter's memory is exalted in a display at the Mansudae memorial hall.

⁵⁰ *ibid* pg 389

⁵¹ Kim Jong-suk's biography is affectionately titled *The Mother of Korea*. For the Party as the mother figure see *Rodong Sinmun* Feb 4, 1981 as cited in Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*. New York: Norton, 1997 pg 418

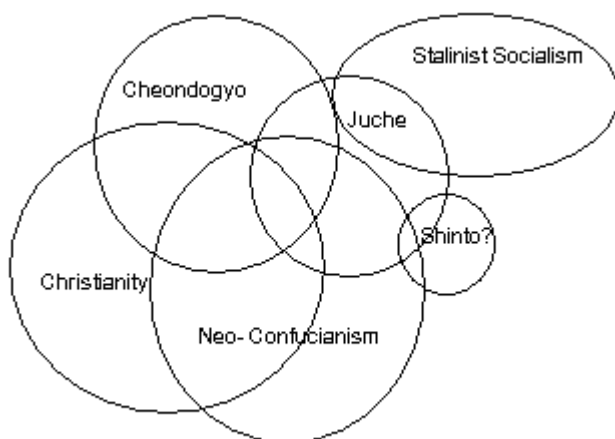
⁵² Cumings' interpretation of the DPRK as a corporatist state looks at the DPRK as upholding a traditional notion of obligatory loyalty to leadership in exchange for the leader's unconditional love. This concept is universal in some respects and can be found in medieval European ideas of leadership. Cumings cites the Earl of Strafford's assessment in Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*. New York: Theneum, 1970 pg 172, 186 in Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*. New York: Norton, 1997 pg 399

⁵³ Field Notes Nov 5, 2007

Conclusion

Due to the fact that both Cheondoism and Christianity were influenced by the Neo-Confucian background of Joseon Korea it is difficult to give too much credit to either in their direct influence of the DPRK's ideology. Without a doubt the influence is not limited to any one religious movement, they are overlapping. Furthermore the fact that many religious movements under the Japanese colonizers were drawn to nationalistic causes, it is difficult to draw the line between religious and nationalist sectors of society. We can confidently claim that numerous factors affected the formation of the DPRK's ideological arena and that it is not the brainchild of Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il alone. Though some elements thereof may well be original, its nationalist properties in particular can be found in the mixture of the primordial DPRK and similar ideas of economic independence have been supported in the ROK.⁵⁴ Over the years the nature of the ideology in north Korea has changed its form,⁵⁵ but nationalistic ideas that celebrate the uniqueness of being Korean and foster a sense of pride among the people are ubiquitous on the Korean Peninsula.

Juche is now being made somewhat obsolete by the encouragement of Kim Jong-il's Military-First Politics (*seongun cheongchi*). Indeed it is difficult to see how much longer Juche will survive. In the event of reunification under any number of scenarios nationalist sentiment both in the north and the south might serve to bridge some of the otherwise painfully obvious gaps between the two societies. However if *seongun cheongchi* continues to dominate the ideological world of north Korea it may render Juche's legacy useless to prospective reunification in the future of Korea.



⁵⁴ I speak in particular of Park Chung-hee's *saemaul undong* and perhaps a more recent example can be found in recent protests against the KorUS FTA.

⁵⁵ See Pak Han-shik, *The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002

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