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# CONFUCIANISM AND *JUCHE* IDEOLOGY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MANIPULATION OF CONFUCIANISM FOR THE CREATION OF A POLITICAL RELIGION

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how the North Korean *Juche* ideology acquired a religious dimension through the manipulation of traditional concepts from the sixteenth century Neo-Confucianism of Yi Hwang. The study will bring together two of the most influential thought forms in the Korean Peninsula in a new approach from the perspective of religious and political studies, that will lead to their re-evaluation and re-contextualization.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, *Juche* ideology, political religion, sacralisation of politics

That *Juche*, the political ideology of North Korea, is a good example of the sacralisation of politics there is no doubt. The process of turning the state ideology, initially based on Marxism, into a political religion was not one that happened spontaneously and naturally. My claim is that this was a programmatic political goal, for the fulfilment of which several steps were taken. One of these steps consisted in bringing elements of traditional Korean culture into the structure of *Juche* ideology. This paper is aimed at analysing various elements that led to the transformation of the *Juche* ideology of North Korea into a political religion (or a pseudo-religion) with a special focus on the manipulation of traditional Confucian concepts and elements of Confucian spirituality for creating a religious dimension for the state ideology and legitimizing the dynastic political power in North Korea. The choice is determined by a revival of *Juche*-related discourse in the North Korean academia and a recycling process of Confucianism in East Asia (especially at political level), doubled by a continuous emphasis

on *Juche* in the political discourse for justifying socio-political decisions and the growth of the personality cult in North Korea.

Emilio Gentile points out that the importance of the sacralisation of politics was recognized by Jean Jacques Rousseau in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but that now the phenomenon is studied in relation with totalitarian regimes (and the terms ‘political religion’ are used when referring to the religious elements of totalitarian states) as opposed to the more general concept of civil religion that Rousseau had in mind,<sup>1</sup> and as a result, the sacralisation of politics is also a phenomenon that is recognized mainly in regimes with extreme ideology such as the Communist Soviet Union, Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany. Although the main regimes investigated by Gentile in many of his studies are past regimes, the *Juche* Communism of North Korea is still in power and continues to play the role of a political religion as state ideology. Having Rousseau’s theoretical frame in mind, then the sacralisation of politics is not a phenomenon limited to the regimes of extreme ideologies, but it is a reality of modern societies and it “lies at the heart of modern politics”.<sup>2</sup>

One crucial aspect in following the transformation of *Juche* ideology into a political religion is to see how and to understand why the North Korean regime has resorted to incorporating Confucian concepts into *Juche*, an ideology with a strong Marxist foundation and originally opposed to any tradition that predated socialist North Korea. For this, the following matters need to be investigated: the initiation of *Juche* ideology during Kim Il Seong’s<sup>3</sup> era and its development during the reign of Kim Jong Il,<sup>4</sup> North Korean regime’s relationship with Confucianism and how the latter came to be incorporated into the *Juche* ideology and how this scheme is legitimizing NK’s regime as a political religion.

## **1. The Evolution of *Juche* Ideology – Initiation and Development during Kim Il Seong and Kim Jong Il’s Eras**

*Juche* is generally defined as North Korea’s ideology of self-reliance, but it has many more nuances. Etymologically, the meaning of the term derives from the two components: *ju* (主), which means “the main principle” and *che* (體), which means “body” or “self”. Thus the compound literally means “standing on its own” and it is often translated as “self-reliance” or “self-determination”.<sup>5</sup> On a global level it also translates into “sovereign autonomy” *jajuseong*

(自主性), making reference to the detachment of Korean people from the long history of “serving the great” *sadaejuu* (事大主義) - The term was coined by Korean nationalists from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by paraphrasing a Mencian saying for pejoratively describing the centuries long relation between various kingdoms in the Korean Peninsula and China and it also hints at the Japanese colonialism. It also alludes to North Korea’s political independence, economic self-sufficiency and military self-reliance. The concept was launched by Kim Il Seong, during his political campaign of the ‘50s,<sup>6</sup> when he emphasized the importance of developing the nation by using its own resources and human potential in order to claim ideological and political autonomy (at that point from Moscow, later also from China), but also economic self-reliance and self-sufficiency and a strong national defence system (Tai, 1983):<sup>7</sup>

Establishing *Juche* means, in short, being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one’s own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one’s own brain, believing in one’s own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance, and thus solving one’s own problems for oneself on one’s own responsibility under all circumstances. (Li, 1972)<sup>8</sup>

Being promoted as the creation of Kim Il Seong, it is also called 김일성주의 (*Kimilseongjueui*/ Kimilsungism). And because it was further developed by Kim Jong Il, it is also sometimes called 김종일주의 (*Kimjongiljueui*/ Kimiljongism). The institutions of *Juche* ideology are based on the principles of: political independence (*chaju* 자주), economic self-reliance (*charip* 차립)<sup>9</sup> and self-defence (*chawi* 차위).<sup>10</sup>

The development of this “new state ideology” followed a few stages. Most scholars identify three stages - the 50s, 60s and 70s,<sup>11</sup> but some also point at a later stage in 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> There is also the “military first” (*seon gun* 선군) politics, a guiding principle launched during the reign of Kim Jong Il and strongly enforced under Kim Jong Eun,<sup>13</sup> which can also be seen as an attempt at reformulating *Juche* in response to the change of global political conditions that have changed in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but this is not necessarily another stage in the evolution of *Juche*, but rather an expansion of its institutions.

It is obvious that in its early years, North Korea cultivated a pro-Soviet (almost *sadae jueui*) type of nationalism, where the Soviet Union was seen

as the liberator and which allowed them to point at South Korea as being still under the colonial domination of Japan and US:

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 liberated Korean people now entered on a path of constructing an independent and democratic system under favourable 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 favourable factor for the Korean people in building a new democratic Korea. (*Joseon tongsa*, 1958).<sup>14</sup>

But this attitude changed with the beginning of the 50s, when Kim Il Seong changed his attitude towards the USSR after the death of Stalin. He started advocating for an ideologically independent *Juche* state, which would not be politically tributary to China or the Soviet Union:

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. (Kim Il Seong, 1967)<sup>15</sup>

The rise of *Juche* ideology goes along the revolutionary change and the expansion of state independence, while slowly diminishing the role of the Soviet Union in Korea's liberation. At the same time, while the establishment of *Juche* had "a tint of anti-foreignism in its language"<sup>16</sup> on the surface, in the subtext it was meant against Kim Il Seong's political opponents, who were supported by foreign powers (namely China and the USSR).<sup>17</sup>

The stages of development of *Juche* ideology:

In the first stage, 1950s, *Juche* is presented as opposing to the politics of serving the great (USSR and China) and imitating its ways, but in reality, it aims not at confronting the big external powers, but at eliminating the internal elements, political opponents of Kim Il Seong, who had the support of foreign powers (leftist intellectuals such as Choe Changjik and Baek Namun who were eliminated in the power struggles of the late 50s).

The second phase came in the 1960s, when *Juche* was used as a way of securing independence for the Korean Workers' Party and the North Korean regime. It is the stage when the party and the state become one

and when the idea of *Juche* is presented as being the creative application of Marxism-Leninism, not just a mere copy of it.<sup>18</sup> It is also a stage when *Juche* ideology begins to be theorized and pushed towards acquiring a philosophical perspective.

From later 1970s on, *Juche* becomes a complete ideological system, with a logic and a methodology of its own and ready to be adopted as the state ideology. In 1972, the Supreme People's Assembly adopted a new constitution that declared the North Korea (Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea) to be an "independent socialist state" with *Juche* as a guiding principle, and elected Kim Il Sung president of the republic.<sup>19</sup> The climax of this step was Kim Jong Il's work *Juchesasange daehayeo* (*On the Juche Idea*) from 1982.<sup>20</sup> At this point, *Juche* ideology is not merely a creative application of Marxism-Leninism in Korea, but an independent philosophical thought created by the fathers of the nation: Kim Il Seong and Kim Jong Il. "From this point on, *Juche* ideology transformed itself from a mere response to and a way of achieving independence from foreign powers (China, USSR, Japan, USA) into a structural logic dominating the lives of a group of humanity." (Yi, 2000)<sup>21</sup>

I believe that we can identify here a parallel third stage, one that begins with Kim Jong Il's analysis on *Juche*, a stage in which the ideology is programmatically turned into an instrument of the legitimation of political power. One vital element to this stage is the promotion of *Juche* as an original and unique philosophy, created and owned by the North Koreans. The foreign Western powers<sup>22</sup> suggested that North Korea's political institutions were transplanted by the Soviet Union at the end of WWII, but North Korea's official history claims that its institutions were their own creations.<sup>23</sup> In order to establish this once and for all, it was important that the people of North Korea identified themselves with the idea of *Juche*, and this was not an easy task given the Marxist-Leninist foundation of the ideology. A logic bridge, a natural connection of the people to the ideological creation of the "fathers of the nation" was required. This was achieved by the exploitation of familiar elements of cultural heritage in the collective mentality, hence the employment and manipulation of traditional Confucian concepts, along with elements subtly borrowed from Cheondogyo<sup>24</sup> or Christianity. Out of all the elements borrowed in order to legitimize *Juche* ideology and its development into a political religion, Confucianism served best because it provided not only a model of political hierarchical organization (and the idea of the sovereign/ leader being

endowed with the Heaven's Mandate to rule), but also ethical elements that still govern Korean life, on both sides of the dividing border.

## 2. North Korean Regime's Relationship with Confucianism

Korean Confucianism was the ruling ideology of the Joseon kingdom (1392-1910). Adopted from China in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Confucian ideas reached the peak of their theoretical development and the height of their application in the Korean Peninsula during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is the time when education is seen as ethical training and it is a mandatory asset for the makers of politics. Prominent Confucian scholars from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Yi Hwang – Toegye<sup>25</sup> and Yi Yi – Yulgok<sup>26</sup> emphasised the importance of moral education for adequately fulfilling one's role in society and for correctly ruling the people. The ideal of moral accomplishment is the sage man (*seong in* 聖人) who understands the idea of moral self-cultivation and practices it for the greater good of the people. Mary Evelyn Tucker identifies four distinguishable "categories" of Confucianism:<sup>27</sup> political Confucianism, social Confucianism, educational Confucianism and economic Confucianism. Thinking of the highly theorizing Korean Confucianism of the 16th century we can add another one: the spiritual and philosophical Confucianism. An ethical element has attached to all of these categories and imposed a certain kind of rigor that had as starting point the process of self-cultivation, because the man is at the centre of the universe and the power of restoring and keeping the harmony in the phenomenal world is his alone.<sup>28</sup> This process has an inner aspect, which implied an effort for one's own self and an outer aspect, where the cultivation has as aim the greater good, so that the process of what Confucius calls *nei sheng wai wang* 內聖外王 (inner sage, outer king) could be completed. The inner process consists of rectifying and setting straight one's mind-heart (*xin* 心) so that one can complete the knowledge by investigating things, while the outer process consists of setting straight and ordering the things in one's family and in the country and re-establishing the global harmony. The Confucian classic *The Great Learning* (*Da Xue* 大學) points out that the self-cultivation (*xiu shen* 修身) is one of the central stages in the human accomplishment in the two distinct directions: inner and outer. The Korean Confucians, and Yi Hwang Toegye in particular, advocate that the two dimensions of self-cultivation are not two separate elements, on the contrary, they are a twofold whole.

The Confucian masters call this process the sage learning (*sheng xue* 聖學) and for the Korean Confucians, sage learning, or learning to become a sage (*sheng ren* 聖人) means in the end systematizing the interpersonal relations through the self-cultivation and the governing of the others (*xiuji zhiren* 脩其治人) in a process in which putting the ethical theories into practice is vital and it is exemplified by the Confucian masters through their own conduct. The theories on self-cultivation and governing, although applicable for everyone, were meant for the ruling class and most of all for the ruler, but they soon became a defining part of the Korean cultural heritage on a global scale.

The idea appealed to the leaders of the North Korean society, in their revolutionary process of creating a new people, governed by the principle of the unity of thought and conduct. Kim Il Seong had a good intuition of the global strength of the Confucian humanism and the ethics of Toegye and Yulgok's thought and incorporated them in the autarkic state ideology, after a period of denial of Confucianism (and especially of Toegye) in the beginning of the North Korean regime.

The relationship between Confucianism and North Korean regime has not been a smooth one. The repudiation of Confucianism began before the separation of the two Koreas and the formation of the North Korean regime. It began with the fall of the Joseon kingdom in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Confucianism, which was blindly accepted during the Joseon era, began to be openly denied by new intellectuals such as Yun Chiho (1864 – 1945) and Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950) during the Japanese colonial period's process of modernization, one of the major critiques being that the Confucian social hierarchy ruined Joseon society.

On the other hand, new socialist intellectuals of the colonial period,<sup>29</sup> influenced by Soviet Russia's Marxism-Leninism, embraced Marxist materialism as a theoretical weapon to defeat imperialism and began attacking what they called pre-modern and backward Korean Confucianism.

Kim Gu (1931): "Confucianism is incapable of advancing on its own, and this incapability is inherent in its roots."<sup>30</sup>

By the third stage in the development of *Juche* ideology, traditional culture (including Confucianism) and history were widely criticised by the North Korean leadership,<sup>31</sup> but this complete alienation from tradition caused resentment among the masses, so it became clear that traditional ideologies, such as Confucianism had to be revived and some of their key elements had to be recycled into the *Juche* thought. This became even

more of a necessity after 1994, when, with the death of Kim Il Seong, he and the *Juche* ideology he created achieved a new level of sanctity (Kim Il Seong is seen as the father figure, his wife Kim Jong-Suk or the Party or the army is referred to as the mother figure),<sup>32</sup> so that the hereditary succession had to be justified.

### 3. How Confucian Ideas Were Incorporated into *Juche* Ideology

First of all, the Confucian idea that appealed to the North Korean leaders was that of the man being in the centre of the universe, not obeying the Heaven (as in pre-Confucian times), but being an equal partner to the Heaven in his capacity of moral cultivation upon the model of the Heaven, the ultimate moral instance. This is what Anne Cheng called Confucius' "bet on the man",<sup>33</sup> and it is what constituted the core philosophy of the Korean Confucians from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The same logic can be seen in the understanding of humanity in *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)<sup>34</sup>

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. (*Id.*)

The man-centred perspective on nature and the placement of the human on the highest position in the universe due to the fact that he is endowed with ethical features can be traced to the Mencian theory of the human nature, followed by that of Zhu Xi and the Korean Neo-Confucians:

Men and the other myriad things are likewise born into the world. Looking at *gi* (vital energy), there seems to be no difference between them. Looking at *yi* (Principle – governing the ethical conduct), the fact that men are born with human virtues differentiates them from the other beings. Man does not have evil characteristics, making him the lord of all creation. (Zhu Xi)<sup>35</sup>

Given its universal coordinates and at the same time its specificity, Confucian humanism was easily appropriated by the North Korean leaders and added into the mix of Marxist-Leninist ideas that set the foundation of the *Juche* ideology:

The *Juche* idea is a new philosophical thought which centres on man. As the leader said, the *Juche* idea is based on the philosophical principle that man is the master of everything and decides everything. The *Juche* idea raised the fundamental question of philosophy by regarding man as the main factor, and elucidated the philosophical principle that man is the master of everything and decides everything. That man is the master of everything means that he is the master of the world and of his own destiny; that man decides everything means that he plays the decisive role in transforming the world and in shaping his destiny. The philosophical principle of the *Juche* idea is the principle of man-centred philosophy which explains man's position and role in the world. (Kim Jong Il, *On the Juche Idea*, Ch.2)<sup>36</sup>

Obviously, Confucianism is not the only thought form to claim a world model with the human at its centre. From a philosophical standpoint, there are obvious similarities with Western philosophy, but we are right to suspect rather a type of Confucian humanism since the *Juche* ideology sees man, the one that has the power of creation over all aspects of life, as the exponent of his social group and not as an individual.

The Korean Confucianism of Yi Hwang, once discarded as backward and opposed to the revolutionary goals, became once more interesting, as it could serve to further bring *Juche* closer to the traditional world view by re-creating the organic image of the society, where the leader is seen as the brain that guides the masses, which make up the body of the society:

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 breath and move according to the will of the leader. (Ju, Yi, Ju 1994)<sup>37</sup>

For Yi Hwang Toegy: "The monarch is the head of the state, officials are his chest and commoners are its eyes and ears."<sup>38</sup> The organicist theory is further developed by Kim Jong Il, in his commentaries on the idea of *Juche*. The new ontological perspective that he adds to the theory

of the state as a socio-political organism is already beginning to add pseudo-religious elements to the state ideology:

The political and ideological might of the motive force of revolution is nothing but the power of single-hearted unity behind the leader, the Party and the masses. In our socialist society the leader, the Party and the masses throw their lot with one another, forming a single socio-political organism. The consolidation of blood relations between the leader, the Party and the masses is guaranteed by the single ideology and unified leadership. (Kim Jong Il, 1990)<sup>39</sup>

Establishing *Juche* as the supreme state ideology is inevitably linked with legitimizing the leader as the unique ruler, the providential head of state that has the approval of the whole universe, and the capacity to restore universal harmony, having thus the same attributes as the sage kings of the past. This is probably the most obvious deviation of *Juche* ideology from the Marxist-Leninist theory on the relationship between the Party and the masses, the introduction of the Supreme Leader (*suryong*), which is endowed with the moral ability of the sage kings of the past, and thus possessed the Heaven's approval for governing the people. This process of deifying the leader serves at the same time at justifying the dynastic hold of political power. The ideology and its creators share a manifest destiny and are invincible, as we can see from Kim Il Sung's 1992 New Year's message:

I take great pride in and highly appreciate the fact that our people have overcome the ordeals of history and displayed to the full the heroic mettle of the revolutionary people and the *indomitable spirit of Juche* Korea, firmly united behind the party [...] No difficulty is unsurmountable nor is any fortress impregnable for us when our party leads the people with the *ever-victorious Juche-oriented strategy and tactics* and when all the people turn out as one under the party's leadership.<sup>40</sup>

When the leader and the Party are destined to guide the people with the use of the "ever-victorious *Juche-oriented strategy*", the issue of loyalty and filial piety, fundamental Confucian concepts, towards the leader and the Party goes without saying: The issue of loyalty and filial piety to the party and the leader is crucial in carrying out the historical process of the revolution of the working classes,<sup>41</sup> since the leader takes upon himself

this almost messianic role of guiding the chosen people, the ones who are destined to prevail.

#### **4. How this Scheme is Legitimizing North Korea's Regime as a Political Religion**

Although officially *Juche* is a “revolutionary new atheistic philosophy” and any remote association with religion is strongly denied, it undoubtedly acquired a dimension beyond the realm of the secular, which is easy to identify if we take as reference the following:

By taking over the religious dimension and acquiring a sacred nature, politics went so far as to claim for itself the prerogative to determine the meaning and fundamental aim of human existence for individuals and the collectivity, at least on this earth. A religion of politics is created every time a political entity such as a nation, state, race, class, party or movement is transformed into a sacred entity, which means it becomes transcendent, unchallengeable, and intangible. As such, it becomes the core of an elaborate system of beliefs, myths, values, commandments, rituals and symbols, and consequently an object of faith, reverence, veneration, loyalty and devotion, for which, if necessary, people are willing to sacrifice their lives. The resulting religion of politics is a *system of beliefs, myths, rituals and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity*. (Emilio Gentile, 2006)<sup>42</sup>

In his commentaries on the idea of *Juche*, Kim Jong Il clearly states that *Juche* is not a religion and he denies the existence of a god, but at the same time he attaches spiritual qualities to the ideology. One such an element is the concept of an “immortal socio-political life”: “The physical life of an individual person is finite, but the integrity of the masses rallied as an independent socio-political organism is immortal.” (Kim Jong Il, 1987)<sup>43</sup>

This idea is used in relation to that of the “sage ruler” (of the past), especially after Kim Il Seong’s death, in order to initiate the worship of the “sun leader” and father of the nation, who, like the sage kings of the golden past when the world was ruled by the power of ethical virtues, was endowed with Heaven’s mandate to rule. The cult of personality is thus weaved into the philosophical commentaries on *Juche*, in a two-way strategy: the father (Kim Il Seong) made use of the Confucian concepts in

order to ensure the hereditary succession for the son, destined to rule over the new people (the socialist new man of North Korea), the son (Kim Jong Il) makes use of the same strategy in order to encourage the worshipping of the father and to create a “sacred history” for this new chosen people. This fits into the pattern of a classic process of sacralisation of politics (which is also broadly called secular religion or political religion of pseudo religion, ersatz Religion) that Emilio Gentile attaches to the creation of totalitarian regimes:

This process takes place when, more or less elaborately and dogmatically, a political movement confers a sacred status on an earthly entity (the nation, the country, the state, humanity, society, race, proletariat, history, liberty or revolution) and renders it an absolute principle of collective existence, considers it the main source of values for individual and mass behaviour, and exalts it as the supreme ethical precept of public life. (E. Gentile, 2000)<sup>44</sup>

Seen from this perspective *Juche* ideology is a secular attempt to create a religious sense of state, of community in the same way Eric Voegelin sees Ancient Egypt pharaohs (namely Akhenaton)’s attempt to explain what he calls their little piece of reality divorced from the spiritual beyond, to which they reduced the human frame of reference.<sup>45</sup> Obviously the reference here is to National Socialism – the Führer and the people are almost spiritually chained together- but we can easily see its extent to Korean socialism, where the great leader- the people and the Party are one. In the good Confucian tradition, the leader has the task of “correctly guiding” the people, but towards the goal of building the socialist and communist society:

The working-class party is the general staff of the revolution, and the leader of the working class is the foremost leader of the revolution. How the masses are awakened to consciousness and organized in a revolutionary way, and how they perform their revolutionary duties and historical mission, depend on whether or not they are given correct leadership by the party and the leader. Only when they receive correct guidance from the party and the leader, would the working class and the masses of other people be able to vigorously develop the deep-going and complicated revolutionary struggle to transform nature and society, achieve national and class liberation, build a socialist, communist society successfully, and run it properly. (Kim Jong Il, 1982)<sup>46</sup>

The successful creation of the communist society that Kim Jong Il states as final goal, under the guidance of a providential leader, results into a kind of “sacralisation of the collectivity”,<sup>47</sup> which assumes in turn its providential destiny of following the providential leader that was “assigned” to it, making thus the hereditary transfer of power not only justified, but also “necessary”.

## Conclusions

Emilio Gentile claims that ideologies do not appear in cultural vacuum, but they spring from a culture, which precedes and predates any political ideology. The attempt to completely break away from any traditional thought and behavioural patterns is unrealistic and even stern ideologies such as *Juche* had to reconsider elements of traditional culture, such as Confucianism. At the same time, the ideologies and the institutions they create are affecting fundamentally the worldview of the societies that embrace them. In the case of North Korea, *Juche* ideology, the main tool in the process of the sacralisation of politics and the sacralisation of the collectivity gave additional birth to a form of defensive nationalism (“our own”, “standing on our own”) where any intersection with cultural elements from outside the *Juche* time or *Juche* space is perceived as an invasion and as such should not be allowed. The “martyrdom” of resisting the “foreign contamination” is best described in Kim Myong Ik’s<sup>48</sup> poem *The People of Joseon* (조선사람들 *Joseon saramdeul*):

Even when we were tightening our belt  
 We did not drink Coca-Cola.  
 Even when we were drinking muddied water,  
 At least we drank our own water.<sup>49</sup>

*Juche* ideology of North Korea is a religious system, “the guiding principle for all actions” as it is stipulated in the third article of North Korea’s Constitution,<sup>50</sup> which fulfils all the criteria systemized by Gentile in his definition of political religions: “(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 this 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 and the party and tied to the existence of a 'chosen people', which were glorified as the regenerating force of mankind." (Gentile, 2005)

*Juche* ideology is also an active institution, which evolves and adapts to times and to needs, and which serves its declared purpose of creating a socio-political theoretical frame for the advancement of the North Korean society, by using all means necessary, including resorting to elements of (common) Korean traditional culture for the legitimation of an "eternal" political power.

NOTES

- 1 Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, translated by George Staunton, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 2.
- 2 In the Introduction to *Political Religion beyond Totalitarianism. The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy* (2013), the editors found the role of the political religions at the heart of modern societies: “Any agent in modern politics, be it states, parties, politicians, pressure groups or newspapers, simply had to appeal to the masses and win their hearts and minds. This was done through messages that often used religious forms and language, providing meaning, coherence, identity, myths, rituals and a cleaner distinction between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. While in many Western countries church and state were formally separated, ambitious political agents offered narratives which gave their adherents a feeling of belonging and a sense of meaning. Increasingly politics came to resemble belief systems which claimed to explain the purpose of human existence, thus creating what has been termed a ‘secular religion’. Veneration and sacralisation became a characteristic of all forms of modern politics; of democracies, political leaders, the nation, the Aryan race and so on. Modern politics, it can be argued, has its own ‘holy scriptures’ (the American Constitution [1787], the *Communist Manifesto* [1848] or *Mein Kampf* [1925-26]), its own prophets (Karl Marx, Adam Smith or Abraham Lincoln) and its own martyrs (Martin Luther King, Horts Wessel or Mahatma Ghandi). In the western world, since the late eighteen century, people thus often came to experience ‘politics as religion’, pp. 1-2.
- 3 Kim Il-Sung or Kim Ir Sen (1912-1994), referred to by the North Korean Government as The Great Leader or Supreme Leader (위대한 수령, *widaehan suryeong*), assumed office between 1948-1994 and was named in the North Korean constitution “the Eternal President of the republic” (공화국의 영원한 주석 *gonghwagukeui yeongwonhan juseok*) in 1998. As a result of the constitutional changes of 1998, the title of President of North Korea is no longer used, after the death of Kim Il Seong in 1994. Instead, the current head of state, Kim Jong Eun, has the title of Supreme Leader.
- 4 Kim Jong Il (1941-2011), Kim Il Seong’s son and the Supreme Leader of DPRK between 1994-2011.
- 5 Hale (2002), Lee (2003), Shin (2007), etc.
- 6 According to Chung Young-Soon in *The Resurrection of Confucianism in North Korea* (2010) this was on December 28, 1955, in an address at a mass campaign organized by the communist party.
- 7 Tai Sung An, *North Korea in Transition: From Dictatorship to Dynasty*, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1983.
- 8 Li Yuk Sa, ed. *Juche! The Speeches and Writings of Kim Il Sung*, Grossman, 1972, p. 157

- <sup>9</sup> Kim Il Sung first spoke about this two concepts on Feb. 8, 1963, at the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Korean People’s Army.
- <sup>10</sup> According to North Korean agencies, quoted by Bruce Cumings, Kim announced the idea of *chawi* on Oct. 5, 1963, at the graduating ceremony of Kim Il Sung Military Academy.
- <sup>11</sup> As identified by many scholars among which Chung Young Soon, 2012.
- <sup>12</sup> Cristopher Hale, for instance, in “Multifunctional *Juche*: A Study of the Changing Dynamic between *Juche* and the State Constitution in North Korea” in *Korea Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 283-308.
- <sup>13</sup> Kim Jong Eun or Kim Jong-un (according to the North Korean official sources born in 1982) is the grandson of Kim Il Seong and the son of Kim Jong Il and his successor to power. He assumed office in 2011.
- <sup>14</sup> *Joseon tongsa* in the collection of *Joseon Minjujueui Inmin Gonghwaguk Ryeoksa Yeonguso*, 1958, pp. 439-440.
- <sup>15</sup> Kim Il Seong, “Sasang saeopeseo gyojojeuiwa hyeongsikjueuireul toejihago juchereul hwakribhale daehayeo”, in *Kim Il Seong jeojak jeonjip*, Pyeongyang, Rodongdang Chulpansa, 1967.
- <sup>16</sup> Chung (2010), p. 76.
- <sup>17</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>18</sup> Although there is much evidence of Kim Il Seong’s ideological debt to Mao Zedong’s political thought, Kim was never willing to acknowledge it, hence the recognition of the Marxist-Leninist tradition only. The alliance with China is a tense one, North Korea failing to be a grateful nation to its ally after the Korean War: China’s assistance during the war is not celebrated in extravagant monuments like the ones dedicated to the Soviet Union, no statues are dedicated to Mao Zedong or Peng Dehui and Mao Anying (Mao’s son who died during the Korean war)’s remains have not been returned to China (Han Hongkoo, “Colonial Origins of *Juche*. The Minsaengdan Incident of the 1930s and the Birth of the North Korea-China Relationship” in *Origins of North Korea’s Juche*, Suh Jae-Jung, ed., Lexington Books 2013, p. 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Suh, Jae-Jung, “Making Self of North Korea’s *Juche* as an Institution” in *id.*, p. 11.
- <sup>20</sup> *On the Juche Idea* - Treatise Sent to the National Seminar on the *Juche* Idea Held to Mark the 70th Birthday of the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung March 31, 1982.
- <sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.* in Chung (2010), p.76.
- <sup>22</sup> Namely, the United States.
- <sup>23</sup> Suh (2013), p. 9.
- <sup>24</sup> The Religion of the Heavenly Way, originally called Donghak (Eastern Learning), “Korea’s oldest indigenous organized religion, dating back to 1860”, similar in its practices and terminology with aspects of Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Catholicism. Baker (2007), p. 449.

- 25 Yi Hwang 李滉(1501-1570) , known under his scholarly name Toegye 退溪 (Retreating Creek), is one of the most prominent Confucian scholars of the 16th century Joseon kingdom. Dubed the “Zhu Xi of Korea” he has massively synthetised, organized, made in-depth anylisis and theorized on the works of the Chinese master Zhu Xi (1130-1200).
- 26 Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584), also called Yulgok 栗谷(Chesnut Valley), philosopher and social reformer, is notoriously known as Toegye’s ideological rival. He followed the teachings of the Chinese master Wang Yang Ming (1472-1529).
- 27 Mary Evelyn Tucker, Introduction to the *Confucian Spirituality* (2004).
- 28 This is what many scholars call “Confucian humanism”.
- 29 Socialism began in Korea around 1920s.
- 30 Op. cit. in Chung (2010), p. 71.
- 31 The writings of Toegye were considered in North Korea “backward and feudal” (Chung, 2010, p. 80).
- 32 Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 2005.
- 33 “Le pari sur l’homme”, Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, 1997.
- 34 Op. cit. in Chung (2010), p. 78.
- 35 Zhu Xi, *id.*, p. 79.
- 36 Kim Jong Il, *On the Juche Idea*, pdf, p. 7 on [www.korea-dpr.com](http://www.korea-dpr.com). In his speech *On the Juche Idea of Our Party from 1985, the idea is obsessively repeated*: “Late President Kim Il Sung created Juche idea after acquiring a deep insight into the requirements of a new era when the oppressed and the humiliated masses of the people became masters of their destiny. Thus he developed their struggle for *Chajusong* onto a higher plane and opened up the age of *Juche*, a new era in the development of human history... The revolutionary idea of the working class emerges as the reflection of the mature demand of history and the revolution in their development. In order to advance the revolution under the new historical conditions, the revolution in each country should be carried out responsibly by its own people, the masters, in an independent manner, and in a creative way suitable to its specific conditions. It is the essence of Juche idea. The Juche idea is a new philosophical thought which centres on man. It raised the fundamental question of philosophy by regarding man as the main factor, and elucidated the philosophical principle that man is the master of everything and decides everything .The philosophical principle of the Juche idea is the principle of man-centred philosophy which explains man’s position and role in the world. That man is master of everything means that he is the master of [the] world and plays the decisive role in transforming the world and in shaping his destiny. Establishing Juche in ideology is the primary requirement of the masses’ struggle for *Chajusong*. The revolution and construction are man’s conscious activities. Establishing Juche in thinking, therefore, is the only way to establish Juche in politics, economy, defence, and all other domains. The

Juche idea was created by the late President Kim Il Sung and is developed and enriched by General Secretary Kim Jong Il." [KCNA]

37 *Op. cit.* in Chung (2010), p. 80.

38 *Id.*

39 Kim Jong Il, *Socialism of our country is a Socialism of our style as the embodiment of the Juche idea*, p. 7, on [www.cnet-ta.ne.jp/juche/default.htm](http://www.cnet-ta.ne.jp/juche/default.htm)

40 "Political Ideology: The Role of Chuch'e", *Country Missing*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Library of Congress, 1993.

41 Chung (2010), p. 80.

42 Emilio Gentile. *Politics as Religion*, translated by George Staunton, Princeton University, Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2006, p. xiv.

43 Kim Jong Il, *On some problems of education in the Juche idea*, Pyongyang, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1987, p. 19.

44 Emilio Gentile, "The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism", in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion*, Vol. 1, No.1/ Summer 2000, p. 18.

45 Paraphrase from Eric Voegelin, *Religiile politice (The Political Religions)*, trad. Bogdan Ivaşcu, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2010.

46 Kim Jong Il, *On the Juche Idea*, pdf., pp.14-15.

47 Eric Voegelin in 1938, in *Political Religions*, with reference to Fascism.

48 Member of North Korea's Writers Federation.

49 [http://tongilgs.org/board/view.php?&bbs\\_id=cu01&page=2&doc\\_num=21](http://tongilgs.org/board/view.php?&bbs_id=cu01&page=2&doc_num=21)

50 *Juche – A Christian Study of North Korea's State Religion*, Thomas J. Belke, Living Sacrifice Book Company, Bartlesville, OK, 1999.

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