

The Red Banner philosophy as religious legitimation of the DPRK political apparatus in the civil life

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Until 2012, the official state reason of the DPRK according to its constitution was Juche Idea. Juche philosophy was designed by Hwang Jang-Yop, who studied philosophy in the 1920s in Moscow ¹ and who was a specialist on philosophical issues, thus having a large expertise on explaining the moral and ethical behavior of the people and take over the demand of the people to end the hierarchical standpoints from monarchy shaping a philosophy that emphasizes on individuality connected to independence, creativity and socialiability ². He later was degraded to be a chief ideologue in foreign sources, however, although being very close to Kim Il-sung, his main task was to push forward the intellectual circle of the DPRK. Later on, Kim Jong-il interpreted and re-interpreted Juche just to finally drop it out ³. While Kim Jong-il installed the Songun policy as official state philosophy and made it the guideline for political and economical issues, an informal belief started to grow in the DPRK: the 'red-banner philosophy'. This belief connects shaman beliefs (which are officially labeled as superstitious and counter-revolutionary) with Korean mythology (especially the superiority of the Korean emperor and nation), Confucianism (esp. their ethics and values, but also the heavenly mandate), and the glorification of political figures. Mythical figures, such as the Chollima or Mount Paektu with its Heavenly Lake became part of worship. Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-suk (Kim Jong-il's mother) were venerated and the government could informally claim the heavenly mandate. Although the government of the DPRK saw Korean religious movements and Korean traditions as superstitions, as well as the social hierarchy of Confucianism as outdated, it would take until the 1970s that the DPRK government de facto went back to the old monarchical system and implemented the Kim dynasty. Kim Il-sung even emphasized on the Korean national features and wanted Korea to go its own way – a mixed path of modernity and history. The government even spent money on finding Dangun's burial site (though some believe it is not really Dangun's), historical monuments and temples are restored.

The media in the DPRK always emphasizes the pride of Korean history, the achievements of the Koreans, and the Koreanization process against foreign influences (even of befriended nations, such as China). Mount Paektu is an important spot in Korean shamanism. Even South

Koreans were allowed to do a pilgrimage to Mount Paektu and shamans performed rituals for Korean reunification⁴. The spiritual ideals of Korean society were connected to the national political guideline, even though they were officially illegal and prohibited under the act against superstition. The elite of the DPRK clearly saw that the traditional beliefs were strongly rooted in the Korean mentality and that one shall include the traditional religious values in the Koreanization process rather than fighting it. Even further, if religious institutions get part of the formal process, then the state-church cleavage, as opponent forces will be deescalated and loyalty ensured. As the economic situation of the DPRK worsened drastically in the late 1990s, Kim made religious efforts to solidarize the nation politically.

At first, since Mount Paektu is that holy, it grants the DPRK government the heavenly mandate, especially as DPRK sources claimed Kim to be born on a site on Mount Paektu in 1942 (though he was born in Siberia in 1941). A legend was founded that a bright star appeared on the sky on the evening when Kim Jong-il was born, postulating the message that a ruler chosen by God's grace was born. Before that, Kim Il-sung was called 'bright star' as a reference to both, the Communist Red Star, and the mythological meaning. However, it is no coincidence that the legend of Kim Jong-il's birth shows so many parallels to the birth of Jesus Christ. Though he was not born in the peasant's barn hay, he was born in a refugee camp for revolutionaries and the star guided the people the way to the new 'messias'. Even further, the Red Banner philosophy emphasises the spiritual role of the leader, which was legitimized with the heavenly mandate and the successful revolution and the importance of the revolutionaries in the Kim lineage. Kim even reopened a caste system in 2000 to classify people's loyalty on birth status, closely linked to the traditional Korean caste system as it existed until 1896.

The whole family is venerated god-likely and thus temples, monuments and obelisks have been installed where people pray to the Kim family. People often gather together for rituals and pray to the Kim's for good harvests, health care, etc.

However, this mythological belief is breaking down now, as Kim Jong-un killed people from his own family⁵, and displaces important family figures, thus acting against the mythological beliefs, as well as provoking military confrontations and shortages of daily life needs⁵.

Kim Jong-il could use the religious veneration of his family to ask for solidarity, and thus even during the great famine, people tried to explain everything on a religious basis. But now, people blame politics, since purges and collective punishment intimidate the people and everyone fears the government. Even further, people require visas now to travel to other provinces which limits the people's freedom⁵. The rising prices make the people even more

angry, since the top government wastes all the money for military provocations and missiles instead of supplying the people with food ⁵.

During Kim Jong-il, shortages were seen as bad fate or disgrace of the gods, since classical symbolism, such as birds, winter freezes, etc. all had a certain meaning and therefore local rituals were maintained, while now nobody knows what one has to do not to be targeted by the state.

Traditional medicine, the belief in body harmony through yin and yang, as well as fortune telling and sorcery are common in the belief of ordinary citizens, especially in low classes.

The rise of shamanism in the 1990s however did not arise because of governmental support, but rather as sign of disfavor towards the government ⁶. Formally, the party keeps the line that religion and religious beliefs are not accordable with the revolutionary path, however, Kim Jong-il financed religious places in which he became the most important person and connected shamanism with his ideological beliefs to make the Red Banner philosophy which is officially not mentioned in any North Korean sources and kept secret to the outside the most powerful as possible. As Kim was educated very conservatively and patriotic, he probably had a belief in Korean myths and traditional religion as well, such as Kim Il-sung was educated with Korean values, and though officially declaring them counter-revolutionary, set up the Confucianist ideals in his party structure. As a North Korean defector points out: "Although Christianity is almost non-existent in North Korea, you might be surprised to learn that we actually do have very strong concepts of ghosts or spirits in the DPRK. And in fact Shamanism, or human communication with the spirit world, is something that is very popular in North Korea, where it crops up most often in the form of fortune-telling. Like anywhere in the world, when things get too much and life gets unbearably hard, people like to know what is ahead of their future. Spiritual beings can help in this regard, and as a result, many North Koreans invest their money in fortune-telling. North Koreans, you see, would rather trust the spirits than the party or nation" ⁷. Thus, I assume that even the top officials kept the belief in ghosts and spirits during the period of the first two Kims. Anyways, only traditional shamanism is de facto prohibited, while shamans who practise the Confucian-syncretized Red Banner philosophy were even important in generating faith into the Kims and their dynasty. In 2009, Kim even crossed out the word 'Communism' in the constitution, which shows that he went back to the Confucian society. After Kim Jong-il's death, mass pilgrimages took place in the pro-government areas ⁸, while the people in the Korean Rost Belt – as they do not trust in the government – showed no sadness. Within two years, Kim Jong-un destroyed the economy, while malnourishment became widespread. Even further, new signs of a famine

appeared, purges and political chaos made things even worse. In the beginning, people again went to the Red Banner gatherings to pray for food and work. However, I have no real information from the last three years whether people continue believing in the Red Banner philosophy or whether there is a dissolution.

Seemingly, Kim treats his citizens like robots without free mind, trying to make them his longer arm. Thus, he sees the whole society as one unity and he disregards individuality, but rather sees the masses as one collective unit who all have to behave after his will. As a conclusion, there is no place for religion.

Last but not least, many religious symbols disappear out of the state media or the name Kim Jong-un is placed in old slogans making them unauthentic. For instance, the portrait of Kim Il-sung was described as the 'smiling-like-the sun President', and Kim Jong-il was called the 'sun of the 21st century'. The sun stands for yang in Taoism, and thus for manliness and positivity, as well as courage and warmth. Kim Il-sung had very strong ties with Ceaucescu, who was rather a Christian national conservative than a Communist, and Kim Jong-il had strong ties to Zimbabwe and Iran, both are religious countries as well. Thus, officials indeed came in contact with religious questions, and therefore indeed people should solidarize with the political line through spiritual harmony. However, the Red Banner philosophy targeted especially lesser educated and least educated parts in the population who are susceptible for superstitious and sorcery, and so the Kims should get unquestionable truth in the many positive myths and legends about the leadership to consolidate faith in the system. Kim Jong-il's politics had strong anti-enlightenment tendencies.

The third Kim seemingly does not have any heroic legends or deeds that are convincible to the ordinary people as the living situation is factually just too bad to believe in a good spirit of the government and true informations from foreign media, as well as fake news and bias are very widespread in the country now, thus leaving a chaos of information. This might be one of the reasons to restrict free travel within the own country now, since the technological development of the country through illegally traded laptops and disks, does not help the government to keep its line.

It is a tendency that governments fear the influence of religions, since the religious identification is often stronger than the national identification or governmental identification, and thus the North Korean government used to dissolve the newly created state-religion cleavage by creating its own Neo-Confucian shamanism, where state and religion are one, such as it was in Imperial Korea. However, as people adopted this informal religion on their own and were not forced to, since the official party line was atheist Juche philosophy and

under Kim Jong-il, strongly atheist Songun philosophy, it also shows that people are in favor for the governmental system, even if they are not always satisfied with state policies. The veneration of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-suk as god-like figures and national saviors, as well as Kim Jong-il as legitimate heir who has heavenly-given authority depicts that people in the country, even in moments of strongest disgrace, believed in a kind of artificially created Confucian Koreanity. On the other hand, this only applies to the least and less educated people, while top officials are rather agnostic or have sympathies with Chondoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, or Christianity. Especially Buddhism, Chondoism and Christianity play an influential role, though the latter one can only be found in Pyongyang (since it was traditionally not very widespread in rural North Korea even before the founding of the DPRK).

In the end, it has to be pointed out that traditional shamanism is repressed very much, and thus the rituals are more and more getting lost. Instead they are replaced by private rituals of individual shamans, as well as minor healing practices of folk religion⁹. However, the shamanic elements in the Red Banner philosophy can be practised publicly and people gathered together to cite the great deeds of Kim Jong-il, praying together, conducting rituals together, swearing oath to the nation, doing self-critics and promising to do better, as well as asking the gods for help and to take care of their 'beloved' Kims.

As a result, even if this political-religious movement is in a crisis now, the fact that people voluntarily gathered together after public party announcements shows that North Koreans, as much as they hate the current regime, do not automatically favor the Western system, as the Confucian values are more deeply rooted as ever before. In addition, the attendance of officials in these semi-official prayers, as well as the establishment of informal religious monuments, as well as using official monuments as religious spot shows that even high-ranked officials, as much as they hate the system as well, are loyal to the North Korean basic worldview and show religious sympathies as well. Chondoism as biggest officially organised religious institution was often focussed as anti-governmental and supervised, and therefore the unofficial Red Banner movements can be seen as accepted counter-religion, though it cannot be proven that it was really state-sponsored (but at least it can be proven that it was accepted and tolerated openly by the state, since they sponsored the sites and relicts) or intended as such. In the early 1990s the term 'red banner philosophy' firstly appeared¹⁰, and in 1996, it was officially declared, though the content remained merely unknown. In 1997, it was specified with terms such as 'red spirit', 'socialist wisdom', and metaphysical words were put in the Juche Socialist context¹¹. Thus, it cannot be proven anymore, whether the red

banner philosophy was originally intended to address the newly forming religious movements, or whether the movements appeared as a result of a metaphysical interpretation of the Red Banner philosophy, which was never concretized, though Confucianist etiquettes were brought together with Juche Idea and Socialism was put together with 'the great spirit'. As the Juche Idea more and more disappears in North Korean publications, and as Songun philosophy is intensified under Kim Jong-un, the current situation of the religious movements of the Red Banner philosophy remains unknown and one has to see, whether they can adopt flexible to the new situation or whether they will disappear.

Proofs in DPRK media that Korea is going back to Confucianism and Shamanism

1. Korean traditional medicine

„Die Koryo-Medizin, die die Koreaner von alters her breit angewandt haben, ist sehr hochwirksam, hat keine Nebenwirkungen und ist für Konstitutionen der Koreaner geeignet. Dank der volksverbundenen Gesundheitspolitik wurden in den letzten Jahren viele Koryo-Medizin-Fabriken in der DVRK rekonstruiert und die heilkräftigen Koryo-Medizinen in grossen Mengen hergestellt, die zur Gesundheitspflege der Bevölkerung aktiv beitragen.“
(„Mehr Koryo-Medizin für die Bevölkerung“, Stimme Koreas – German-language foreign radio from the DPRK, 2012)

2. Traditional symbolism, such as spring as sign of youth and birth/ References to pre-DPRK literature

“Mangyongdae, der Geburtsort des Präsidenten Kim Il Sung, ist in Frühling bildhaft schön. In diesem Jahr begeht das koreanische Volk feierlich den 100. Geburtstag Kim Il Sung. Mit dem bedeutsamen Tag der Sonne, seinem Geburtstag, ist der Frühling von Mangyongdae für das koreanische Volk eine besondere Jahreszeit.
In der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts war Korea Kolonie des japanischen Imperialismus. Voller Trauer um den Verlust des Heimatlandes schrieb damals ein berühmter koreanischer Dichter namens Ri Sang Hwa das Gedicht ‚Kommt auch auf dem von Fremden besetzten Feld der Frühling‘.“ („Frühling in Mangyongdae“, Stimme Koreas – German-language foreign radio from the DPRK, 2012)

3. Traditional education hierarchy (Confucian Learning)

"I met a girl. 'I am Choe Song Rim. I will study hard to be the best.' Seeing the children studying without any difficulty from the first day of the new school year, I admired the educational policy of the state that regards education as an important issue concerning the future of the nation." ("Welcome, newcomers to school", Voice of Korea, 2012)

"Da bekamen wir die Universität als höchsten Tempel der Bildung mit einer über ein halbes Jahrhundert langen Geschichte in Sicht."

(„Im höchsten Tempel der Wissenschaft“, Stimme Koreas – German-language foreign radio from the DPRK, 2012)

4. References to values such as wisdom and etiquette as morally most-important

„위훈의 그 사연을 어이 다 말하랴
래일을 속삭이며 이밤은 깊어가네“
(전동우: 지새지 말아다오 평양의 밤아, 1989)

5. Unquestionable leader with total power

„피어린 천리길 만리를 간다해도
수령님께 다진 맹세 지키여 싸우리“
(젊은 기관사)

„장군님의 령도따라 부강조국건설에로“
(황진영: 더 높이 더 빨리, 2001)

Notes:

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3. French (2007), p. 44 f.
4. Kendall, Laurel: The Global Reach of Gods, in: Csordas, Tomas (ed.): Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, p. 317
5. Kang Ji-won: Interview with Two N.Koreans: Shock and Horror on Assassination of Kim Jong-nam, Rimjingang, 9 March 2017, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/20170218-n-korea-interview-kim-jong-nam/>; Kang Ji-won; Ishimaru Jiro: Mass protest at a Collective Farm in N.Korea – Stones Thrown by Farmers at Officials, Rimjingang, 8 December 2015, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/protest-collective-farm/>; ____: Female Soldiers are in Miserable Conditions – Mothers are worried about their daughters getting sexually harassed and becoming malnourished, Rimjingang, 13 February 2017, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/20170206-woman-army-02/>; Kang Ji-won: Defense Drill For Cruise Missile Attack – Soldiers Suffer From Malnutrition, Tuberculosis and Chaos, Rimjingang, 7 June 2017, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/reinforces-protection-wall-2/>; ____: Hunt for defectors resumed, Rimjingang, 9 September 2016, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/nk-korea-missing-person-investigation/>; Kang Ji-won; Ishimaru Jiro: Tighter Control of Inter-provincial Movement: Investigating corruption in Hoeryong City's People's Security Station, Rimjingang, 17 August 2016, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/tighter-control-over-peoples-transit-investigating-on-corruption-of-peoples-security-station-of-hoeryong-city-related-to-the-issue-of-transit-pass/>; Ishimaru Jiro: Possible Firing Squad Executions Punish Violators of "Kim Jong-un's Instructions", Rimjingang 15 January 2015, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/executions-punish-violators/>; ____: Kotchebi, the Homeless, Under the Kim Jong-un Regime (PART5) – Toddlers and female Junior High School students roaming around a city – Some children have lost their legs, Rimjingang, 26 January 2017, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/20170110-children-homeless-05/>; Kang Ji-won; Ishimaru Jiro: How do the N.Korea people think about four years of Kim Jong-un's ruling? Acid evaluation calling him "a kid", Rimjingang, 13 January 2016, http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/20160113_interview_north_koreans/; Kang Ji-won: Worsened power supply paralyzed the train system, reportedly causing deaths in a stopped train, Rimjingang 18 November 2016, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/report/2161118-track/> - all retrieved on 30 June 2017

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10. 方浩范: 浅谈马克思主义朝鲜化发展轨迹, 第四届马克思主义中国化论坛, 2013, <http://marxism.org.cn/detail.asp?id=3537&Chanel=13&ClassID=13> (retrieved on 1 July 2017): 《“先军思想”的前身是金正日所提出的“朝鲜式社会主义”（우리식 사회주의）和“红旗思想”（붉은기 사상）。“朝鲜式社会主义”主要强调朝鲜选择走社会主义道路的必要性，并强调社会主义理念的正当性、科学性。
1991年金正日发表了题为“人民大众为中心的朝鲜式社会主义必胜不败”（인민대중 중심의 우리식 사회주의는 필승불패이다）一文。文中把朝鲜式社会主义概念规定为，领袖-党支部-人民大众团结一心的社会主义，并论述朝鲜式社会主义不同于与苏联和东欧其他社会主义国家，具有科学和优越的体制。》
11. __: 김정일의 붉은기 사상, <http://nk.joins.com/dic/view.asp?idx=20010105112225> (retrieved on 1 July 2017): „김정일의 붉은기 사상은 '로동신문' 1995년 8월 28일자를 통해서 처음으로 알려졌다. '붉은기를 높이 들자'라는 제하의 정론을 통해 '붉은기는 김정일 동지의 신념이며 철학이자 수령을 옹위하는 기치'라고 규정하였다. 그리고 '적들이 바라는 것'은 '우리의 사상이 희어지는 것'이지만 '우리는 붉다'고 선언하였다. 이후 1996년 신년사 '붉은기를 높이 들고 새해의 진군을 힘차게 다그쳐 나가자'에서 붉은기라는 단어가 다시 사용되었다. 로동신문은 1996년 12월 2일자에서 '우리 붉은기는 애국의 기치이다'라는 논설을 통해 그 내용이 좀더 구체적으로 제시하였다. 그 내용으로는 주체의 혁명철학과 일심단결의 혁명철학, 신념의 철학 등이 제시되었다. 특히 붉은기 사상은 김정일과 대중을 하나로 잇는 가장 강력한

구호이며 윤리인 '일심단결'이 핵심개념이다.“; ___:붉은기 사상,
<http://nkd.or.kr/pds/nk/view/238> (retrieved on 1 July 2017): „김일성 사후 김정일을 중심으로 북한주민들의 사상결속을 위해 제시한 사상이다. 북한은 96년 1월 1일 제하의 공동사설을 발표한데 이어 1월 9일 제하의 노동신문 정론을 발표해 붉은기 사상을 정식화하기 시작했다. 노동신문 정론에서는 붉은기 사상을 「주체사상의 요구대로 오직 자기힘을 믿고 자기식대로 살아나가며 자기 운명을 개척해 나가는 창조적 철학」 이라고 밝혀 붉은기 사상이 주체사상의 하위개념임을 분명히 했다. 또한 「붉은기 사상이란 단결을 하여도 하나의 중심에 기초하여 가장 높은 수준의 단결을 실현하자는 것」 으로 정의함으로써 김일성 사후 김정일을 중심으로 한 사회의 구축에 목적이 있음을 시사하기도 했다. 한편 북한은 붉은기 사상의 실천적 지침으로 혁명적 군인정신과 수령결사옹위정신을 제시했다. 「혁명적 군인정신을 체득하고 투쟁하는 사람이 바로 우리당의 붉은기 사상의 제일체현자이며 우리 혁명이 요구하는 전위투사이다」 (로동신문, 96. 10.18 일자)라고 정의하고 「붉은기 사상은 본질에 있어서 혁명의 령도자에 대한 절대적인 숭배심이며 령도자와 생사운명을 같이하려는 수령결사옹위정신이다」 (로동신문, 97. 1. 1)라고 규정한데 따른 것이다.“

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