

## The Juche philosophy of North Korea – Philosophical Content and Practical Failure

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The Juche philosophy has been the leading philosophy of the DPRK, probably one of the most isolate countries of the world, and therefore the content of this philosophy is not known to many outsiders, and even further, not too many people are interested in it. But what exactly is the content of this philosophy?

At first, the foreign language state media of the DPRK speaks of the “Juche Idea”, which goes back to the Korean name *Juche sasang*, where *sasang* means ‘idea’ or ‘thought’ and *Juche* means ‘subject’. Indeed, it turns around the subject – the subject of man. The main subject of interest is man who is placed in the center, and therefore, a man-centered theory (Naenara, without year). Even further, “Man is the master of everything and decides everything” (ibid.). Through this way, Karl Marx’ Historical Materialism is established in Juche, since man is master of everything, there cannot be any God or higher being which created or influences man, since everything depends on man. To go a step further, since man is master of everything, he cannot rely on destiny or fate, but has to take responsibility for everything that happens as he shapes his own destiny. Juche philosophy is not free from religious thought, however, but is heavily influenced by Korean religious tradition. According to Schmitz (2015/2017) the Juche Idea Course issued by the state shows clear hints on Buddhism and Confucianism, though Juche itself is a clear critique to the latter. Unlike Confucianism, where everybody has a societal rule that one has to fulfill, Juche comes to the conclusion that “Man is the social being with independence, creativity and consciousness” (Naenara, without year). It is not even simply anti-Confucianist, but also anti-Marxist, since in Marxism, through knowing one’s class standpoint one forms the masses to resist exploitation and to organize into a collective form to get independent. As Schmitz (2015/2017) points out:

*This gives a new definition to the ‘masses’, since the masses are not an abstract word anymore which is used by politics to paraphrase ‘a will of a group’. In Korean, the will of the group can not be made without the individuals, which is a very new form of thinking. However, this relation is important to solve a contradiction which would appear otherwise. One cannot say that there is a collective conscience while*

*preaching highest individuality. The North Korean elite quickly realised after the founding of the DPRK that appealing to the masses is too abstract and anti-progressive, but appealing to the individual to take part in the masses, gives the individual a 'value'. If someone is treasured for what he is doing, he'll be far more productive than just being a part of the masses – a clever move.*

However, while the independence of man gives man a certain mind of individuality, and while consciousness gives him responsibility, his individuality and responsibility have to be sacrificed to work for the masses in practice. The Korean Communists regarded Confucianism, which is a collective form of government, to be anti-revolutionary. At the same time they learnt in the USSR that Communism emphasizes on a collective. The static hierarchy of Confucianism was seen as trouble and reason of stagnation and to swap it by another collective form thus was an extremely piquant matter. The Koreans wanted to realize themselves and their dreams and many intellectuals actually favored a Korea in which everyone could do what one wants to pursuit one dreams. Therefore, the early philosophers after the founding of North Korea had anti-imperialist, partly even Anarchist thoughts, that did not fit into the outdated values of Korean society. On the other side, the outdated values could be easily used to establish might and power. Therefore, even though Juche actually teaches individual independence so that everyone can pursue one's dream to work for the society and help to shape the society for better, it was quickly transformed into 'political independence' for the cause of national independence in the 1960s as can be seen in Kim, 1969.

Anyways, when Juche was founded, the spirit of individualism stood clearly in the foreground and it was not meant to be a philosophy to 'make' everyone equal, but to 'treat' everyone equal. As Schmitz (2015/ 2017) emphasizes:

*Concerning the individual independence, every human-being has a 'consciousness of independence', and according to Juche philosophy, it is the reason why human-beings will always try to achieve freedom and independence. The individual independence goes along with the political independence, so to say 'life is politics', which means that life and soul equals "social and political integrity" [Naenara, without year]. North Korean literature has many examples, where personal life and politics go together, and people are described to devote their whole life to politics*  
*[...] As important as independence, which is described the soul of human-beings (or 'the soul of man'), another essential feature is 'creativity' [...]*

Despite the preservation of the national independence – called *Jaju* - economic autarchy (*Jarib*) and self-sufficiency in defense (*Jawi*) were added on the political agenda of Juche politics in the mid-1960s

(Kim, 1969; Schmitz, 2015/2017). However, the philosophical core of Juche does not deal with national defense, however, autarchy is important, but not in a political agenda, but in a way to make 'man' autonomous, and thus help him to strive for his independence. To understand the need of it, one has to understand the Juche view of philosophy.

The Juche Idea Course on NAENARA states:

*The fundamental question of Juche philosophy becomes a new thesis of the basic question of philosophy. That is because it implements the requirement of the law of the development of the world outlook of humankind. Philosophy has thousands of years of history and many philosophical schools and well-known philosophers had issued various philosophical viewpoints in the long history. What did such many philosophical schools and philosophers regard or have to regard as the basic question of philosophy? General Secretary Kim Jong Il said: "In the past the relations between substance and consciousness, between being and thinking were regarded as the basic question of philosophy." Multifarious things exist in the world where we live. It is called the material world or matters in philosophical term. People feel various things with their sense organs like eyes, nose, ears, tongue and skin, and find out characters and value by synthesis, analysis and reasoning of the materials by their feelings, making this or that concepts. It is called consciousness or thinking phenomena in philosophical term. In the past the relations between matter and consciousness, between being and thinking were regarded as the basic question of philosophy. This is the question of which is prior, matter or consciousness. Here materialism means that matter is primary and consciousness comes from the matter, whereas the idealism means that consciousness is primary and matter comes from consciousness. The previous philosophies were classified into materialism which analyzed the world materialistically and idealism which analyzed the world idealistically according to the understanding of the relationship between matter and consciousness.*

This means that North Korean scholars are taught that philosophy is traditionally a struggle between a materialistic and idealistic worldview in which either matter or consciousness precedes. Indeed, this form of classification is purely Marxist.

*From the earliest Greek philosophy, of which European philosophy is but a continuation, the philosopher has had to contend with the question: how is reality known? The answer is given from two principal viewpoints, the materialist and the*

*idealist. The materialist method stands at one pole, the idealist at the other.*  
(Tripp, 1970)

In other word: either everything is matter or everything is mind.

However, philosophy is divided in different kinds today, mostly theoretical and practical philosophy and within these two the directions are categorized within their disciplines. Anyways, the North Korean basic thought is that the focus on matter or mind has disadvantages, and instead, the focus shall be on man. Man and all his abilities and social relations shall be in the foreground, rather than metaphysics. And within this, Juche comes to the conclusion that man is asocial Being who transforms society through independence, creativity and consciousness.

*By understanding these three essential features, we can describe all interrelations of human-beings. Human-beings can act creatively, because they are independent and conscious. They are independent, because they are creative and conscious; and they are conscious, because they are creative and independent. Without independence, one cannot be creative without limits, and if one is not conscious when not being independent, then there would be no resistance. (Schmitz, 2015/2017)*

One of the main founders of this philosophy is Hwang Jang-yop, who is often depicted as ‘main ideologue’ of the Kim Il-sung era, which might be right on the one side, but on the other side Hwang was a professional philosopher. His goal was not to indoctrinate the people, but to develop an authentic thought which could move the country forward. His ideas gained large popularity in the government to justify the DPRK politics, but Hwang felt that the state rather feudalized than democratized and therefore he left to South Korea in 1997. Instead of the high individualistic Juche thought in which everybody should be completely free to put in his effort to server for the masses and help to shape the state politics, it was decided very early that North Korea shall go the Kimilsungist way of juche which means that everything is collectivized and everybody has to follow the leader. Juche itself was only introduced in 1955 as a temporary solution as Korea faced two problems. First, the Sino-Soviet split led to the question whether North Korea shall get closer to China or the Soviet Union. To keep both partners, neither Maoism nor the destalinized Khruchevism was adopted, but the Korean way to Socialism was proclaimed. Through this, the state pride could be regained and the state could promote Korea as an independent entity not being dependent on anyone. Second, through emphasizing individualism, Kim could avoid a split between right-wingers and left-wingers. In the beginning of the 1950s, there were probably even more party members in the Chondoist Youth Party, which had close ties to Korean nationalists, extreme right-wingers and church associations than the

Korean Workers' Party. Kim could not betray his left-wingers but also had an understanding for right-wingers, since most Korean Communists received a classical and extremely conservative education. In his first mentioning of Juche in 1955, Leftist internationalism is clearly exchanged though Korean nationalism, which led to party-internal struggles and purges followed. The result, Korean Socialism, was not Juche anymore in the sense of his founders.

The clearly nationalistic character can be seen as such:

*Why does our ideological work suffer from dogmatism and formalism? And why do our propagandists and agitators fail to go deeply into matters, only embellishing the façade, and why do they merely copy and memorize foreign things, instead of working creatively? This offers us food for serious reflection. What is Juche in our Party's ideological work? What are we doing? We are not engaged in any other country's revolution, but precisely in the Korean revolution. This, the Korean revolution, constitutes Juche in the ideological work of our Party. Therefore, all ideological work must be subordinated to the interests of the Korean revolution. (Kim, 1955/2008)*

Schmitz (2016/2017) critically analyzed this passage and came to the conclusion that blaming his ideological writers for copying foreign ideas is too nationalistic and not good. Even further, putting creativity in this context is rather dangerous for the independence of creativity.

*To be creative, one should be able to be inspired by ideas from everywhere and accept these so-called "foreign ideas" to work creatively [...]. Generations build up on knowledge, thoughts and arts of long tradition to develop on a higher stage. Therefore, I strongly disagree with Kim Il-sung's image of creativity and his ideological course proposed in his speech. (Schmitz, 2016/2017)*

However, too strongly nationalistic views were not welcomed in all fractioned and therefore, Kim always had to swap between right and left to please both political spectrums and consolidate his power. However, through this, he failed to implement Juche philosophy from the beginning.

The content of the Juche philosophy is clearly individualistic and focusses on the freedom of human-beings to engage in a Socialist society. Juche indeed gave new chances to the people as it abolished the Confucianist hierarchies and duties, but gave freedom to shape one's own destiny and gave every human his own responsibility. However, Juche in practice failed to do so, because it was never implemented, but instead was overtaken by Kimilsungism from the beginning, giving it no chance to develop.

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