

A Postmodern Interpretation of North Korean Juche Thought

By Eun Hee Shin

Assistant Professor of Religion,

Simpson College, USA

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the life philosophy of North Korea's Juche thought in relation to a theme of communitarianism in a postmodern philosophical context. A broad meaning of postmodernism is viewed as an intellectual movement or orientation that promotes itself as the antithesis of modernism. From a more religio-philosophical perspective, postmodernism is a reaction against the philosophy of Enlightenment and its cultural and conceptual values such as reason, individual freedom, and confidence in the inevitable nature of progress due to scientific discoveries and rationality. Postmodern spirit challenges the vision of Enlightenment that human beings are capable of learning the secrets of nature and the laws that govern the physical world in order to improve human life. Moreover, postmodern philosophical thinking deconstructs the traditional western concept of God, echoing Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God. The death of God marks the disappearance of the independent self and the devaluation of the traditional norms and ethics. Another important consequence of the death of God creates a new mode of thinking that does not conform to the traditional normative rules of logic. This kind of new intellectual movement disrupts the traditional theo-centered idea of the ultimate reality and moral ethics.

However, not all postmodern thinkers would celebrate the idea of deconstruction. For example, Charles Taylor, a Canadian sociologist, points out the danger of deconstruction or deconstructionist approaches mainly adopted by Jacques Derrida. For Taylor, the total deconstruction and its obliteration of the traditional value and idea might lead us to the conceptual void or nihilism. The phenomenon of nihilism is highly problematic in the postmodern discourse, for it shows that our historical life has lost its ground as objective spirit and that the value system which supports this life has broken

down. The entirety of social and historical life has loosened itself from its foundations. Another problematic aspect of deconstruction is that although it breaks down the traditional separation of the cultural dichotomy, the power of deconstruction itself possesses the potential to disrupt important ethical distinctions in this global world.¹ Taylor, in this sense, is not a deconstructionist but rather a “reconstructionist” postmodern thinker who perceives the necessity of creating an alternative value after deconstructing the traditional system. For him, the alternative model would be a more community-oriented one, namely, “communitarianism.” Communitarianism offers us a new understanding of self and other successful conclusion of humanistic nihilism.

Communitarian perspective also provides a useful socio-philosophical framework in reinterpreting the idea of Juche in conjunction with the theory of the socio-political life which can be defined as a “Korean version of postmodern communitarianism.” Here, the notion of postmodernism is not merely understood as a chronological succession of the historical time, but as a qualitative succession to characterize the essential “elements” of the postmodern spirit such as relativity, irregularity, particularity, decenteredness, relationality, and community-oriented pattern throughout the human tradition. In this paper, I shall particularly attempt to search for the postmodern philosophical traditions and elements which have been permeated in North Korea’s Juche thought.

II. The Socio-political Life of Juche Thought

According to Juche thought, a human being has both a physical life and a socio-political life. The individual physical life span is mortal whereas the socio-political life span is immortal. A person’s eternal socio-political life shares the same fate as the associated “socio-political organism.” Juche philosophers advocate that the physical life is given by biological parents, but the socio-political life is given by the society. The social group represented by the working masses will live forever together with the arty, su-ryong, and the history of the father-land and people. A human being is neither a purely spiritual being nor a simple biological being. He/she is a social being who lives and acts in social relationships.

Kim explains that “the Juche idea indicates, for the first time in history, that a man [woman] has a socio-political integrity, as well as physical life.... True human life..... can only be realized admirably in a socialist society based on collectivism. In this society, people are free from all manner of exploitation and oppression, domination and subordination and can lead an independent and creative life.”²

Kim Jong-il continues to emphasize the importance of the socio-political life by contending that “we might say that the socio-political life is more valuable to a man [woman] than physical life... If he is forsaken by society and deprived of political independence, though he seems alive, he virtually dead as a social human being. That is why the revolutionaries deem it far more honorable to die in the fight for freedom than to keep themselves alive in slavery.”³

This relational view of Juche places the people at the center of everything that they are the masters of the world and play the decisive role in transforming the world and in shaping his destiny. Establishing Juche in their life is the primary requirement of the mass’ struggle for their *Jajusong*, that is, the political sovereignty and political autonomy.

Juche philosophers argue that one’s biological life might be independent but not the socio-political life which represents the locus of several relationships. The socio-political life can only be discovered within the context of a fluctuating network of relations. Juche thinkers deconstruct the notion of individual self which is viewed as a mere transitory intersection for a plethora of relationships, undermines the integrity of its autonomous nature. As the majority of the postmodern thinkers agree, Juche thinkers stress that the other is extremely important to the self and its development. One cannot be fully understood without the other. In fact, the emphasis on the other in Juche suggests an eclipse of the self in which the other is self or I in the sense of a fractured self or I. Therefore, the self or I is always defined and functioned only within the communal value. The Juche concept of self and the other in the web of socio-political life is truly co-relative, codependent, and decentered.

This particular view of Juche thought is radically different from that of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Kim Il-sung and Juche philosophers wrestled with the problem of reconciling the claim that Juche was people-centered with the Marxist-Leninist idea for many. The reference to Maxism-Laninism was eventually dropped from the 1980 charter of the Korean Workers' Party and from the 1992 version of the constitution, which states: "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea makes Juche ideology, a revolutionary ideology with a people-centered view of the world that aims towards the realization of the independence of the masses, the guiding principle of its actions."⁴ They engage themselves in a philosophical argument by claiming that the major distinction between them is the different interpretation of a human being. For instance, Juche regards a human being as an individual social life or being whereas Marxist-Leninists views a human being as a production means. Juche thinkers perceive a human being as a social being with relational independence, creativity, and consciousness. As a member of the society, each individual forms the social collective and lives in it with social cooperative relationship with other members of the society. They claim that "Man's [woman's] social being has evolved over the eons. It is not correct to cast man's essential features as the product of the material development, from non-living matters to living matters, from the living matters at low level, animals in general, to the living matters at high level, human beings. Man's [woman's] main features cannot be explained purely in terms of biochemical processes. Juche thought is a guiding principle which should be applied in solving our daily problems."⁵

According to Juche theory, a society governed by Juche is "the most ideal society" for it is developed on the basis of a collective view of life. The socio-political integrity of the masses as a whole is emphasized, while the comparative value of any individual is rather fused within the community.

III. The Socio-Political Life and Communitarian Relationality

A philosophical interpretation of the socio-political life is based on relationality of the socio-political life which is a concrete unity of the life-generating process of an individual life. All finite appearances of one's physical life belong together in an all-embracing socio-political life in which each of its many parts breathe and share the organic life. The unifying principle of Juche creates an inter-relational social fellowship; they are distinguished by their roles and yet are one in their relation. The doctrine of su-ryong has been particularly criticized by many western media that this theory provides self-validation to North Korea's totalitarian government and enabled Kim Il-sung's regime to justify the eventual father-to-son succession of Kim Jong-il in the 1990s. This would be partially true looking at the present political reality of North Korea but, at least in theory, su-ryong is just regarded as a co-relational partner or leader and not just a power to control or dominate the two. The unity of the three is profoundly social, as each of the three is interpenetrated by the other two. This is the core principle of Juche thought which maintains the relational and social character of each member of the trinitarian life and the function of the mutuality of the people, party, and su-ryong.

Su-ryong is not merely a particular person or figure but a virtuous and benevolent leader who functions like the "nerve center" or "top brain" of the nation. Su-ryong becomes a meaningless existence, if he/she does not serve the people. According to Juche, the people are "heaven" (*Yiminwechon*) and su-ryong must listen to the voice of the people, trying to learn their needs and wishes. This is known as the "mass line" called *Gunjungrosong* which suggests the inseparability of su-ryong and the people: su-ryong is always among the people and the people are always in the existence of su-ryong. Kim Jong-il explains the idea of the mass line that su-ryong and the working class party must always go among the masses and listen to their desires. People should be treated like the heaven and su-ryong and the party are nothing more than their servants. "Serving the people" has been the major spirit of su-ryong and one of Kim Jongil's mantras.

The mass line has been regularly exercised in the movement of *Chonrimsa* which is designed not only to enhance an economic production, but also to reorient or reeducate people with a communitarian spirit through cooperative works in the field. People are

grouped as a small unit that creates a new socio-political life until they achieve their final task all together. There is no room for an individual identity or activity but the working unit gives them a totally new and collective identity as one body of life. *Chonrima* is considered to be one of the representative examples of the mass line still practicing in North Korea. In this context of thought, su-ryong cannot be equated with the totalitarian dictator but rather the totality of the socio-political life as a powerful agent of the greater relation of life in which a great multitude of individual life are integrated into a structured whole of coexistence. This kind of interconnected nature of Juche thought has been deeply permeated in North Korean culture and even worked as a peculiar religious spirituality today.

The unity of su-ryong and the people with the connection of the party works out with the cyclical movement of two driving force in the mass line, at least, in theory: one is centripetal force from the above, and the other, centrifugal force from the below. The constant and continuous movement of the unity ensures the social rhythm and order, which in turn gives rise to the transformation of the people through the inner process of renewing and recreating. The political and spiritual unity of su-ryong and the people subsequently occurs in a cyclical and sequential way towards the novel synthesis of the society, that is, the new Juche communitarian society.

The portrayal of the unity can be drawn with the metaphor of bicycle.⁶ The metaphor is enhanced by the prospect that the rider is depicted as su-ryong, skillfully navigating between the perils of the party on one side of the path and the people on the other. Keeping the bicycle upright is the momentum generated by constantly evolving moral dialogues which raise consciousness, clarify, and educate. With each dialogue, the bicycle rolls gently forward down the wide, flat path to the ultimate goal, the Juche communitarian society.

Of course, as we look at the present reality of North Korea from outside, the ideal dynamic relationship between su-ryong and the people looks totally disrupted. The absence of the centrifugal force from the below seems to be eliminated by the tyrannical

leader. However, it is easy for outsiders to criticize Juche for its lack of validity, internal logic, and value as a practical guide for living. The abnormality of the relation cannot be criticized as an internal corruption only which forces people to give infinite loyalty to the su-ryong, but also a negative result of the political frustration brought by the power dominant foreign policy against North Korea. North Korea has tried to normalize with the US for many years but the antagonistic remarks and policy of the US drives the North Korea into an isolated land. The new doctrine of peace led by the US with the western moral absolutism, cultural imperialism, and pro-aggression policies has systemically attempted to paralyze the consciousness of national autonomy and revolutionary spirit of North Korea.

Nevertheless, despite the constant political pressure and the economic sanction from the US, North Korea has maintained her own system at such a level of intensity for long without any internal collapse predicted by many North Korean experts. A simple question can be raised here: How is it possible? North Korea has achieved the seemingly impossible: Kim-to-Kim hereditary leadership and the absolute loyalty and obedience to the su-ryong without lapsing into the disruptive terror of Stalinism or the anarchy of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the context of a stable state of permanent crisis, an institutionalized and continuous emergency.

It is true that the maintenance of this cultic system has been justified by North Korea's ongoing Juche mentality, as a defensive focus of unity against the threat of imperialist subversions, for nearly half a century. The influence of Juche can be seen most strongly in North Korean attitudes toward sovereignty. However, there has been a more fundamental reason to keep the system so strong and powerful. That is the religio-cultural dimension of Juche which is intimately cooperated with Confucian culture. The religious quality of the relationship between father and son should not be missed in understanding the cultural aspects of the Juche thought that enhance the durability of Kim-to-Kim succession.

The vestiges of Confucian thought are primary influence shaping vertical structure of North Korean socialist bureaucratic organization. The hierarchical structure and the ritualistic aspects of Confucianism, although influenced by socialist interpretations, are important determinants for understanding and interpreting postmodern North Korean behavior on both personal and national levels.⁷ Confucian culture is deeply based on a filial piety. In western world, the idea of filial piety is often understood as authoritarian impulse to dominate children or the powerless. However, the original teaching of the filial piety is profoundly reciprocal and relational: If the behavior of children to parents is clearly defined, so is the behavior of the parents to the children. For example, if parents fail to keep the ideal natures, the children's obligation to obedience can be diminished. If parents make a wrong decision, children should protest. In order to be a filial son and daughter, they have to know the difference between right and wrong, too. Therefore, the filial piety does not indicate one-sided authority of the parents over the children or the powerful over the powerless. Filial piety always works with the idea of "remonstrance" which refers to the duty of a child to attempt to dissuade the parent from parent's immoral course of action. The ethic of filial piety continues to work in the present North Korean society. Russian scholar Alexandre Mansourov calls the North Korean system as "politics of filial piety." Kim Jong-il's legitimacy hinges on his filial piety and reinforces the power of Kim Il-sung's legacy from beyond the grave. For instance, Kim Jong-il places his father in the pantheon of Korean rulers which equate him with Tangun, the mystical founder of the Korean nations, whose tomb was reconstructed in the mid-1990s. Also, Kim junior demonstrates his filial piety in observing the longest mourning period in modern Korean history.⁸

In North Korea, society is viewed as one big family led by a benevolent father to whom unconditional respect and gratitude are owed. Su-ryong is revered like parents by the whole society. Kim Jong-il says that "children love and respect their parents not because their parents are always superior to those of others or because the children receive benefits from them, but because the parents are the benefactors of their lives who gave birth to them and have brought them up....All the communist revolutionaries of Korea

have been accorded immortal political integrity by the fatherly leader....Therefore, the loyalty of our party members and working people to the great leader is unconditional.”⁹ Confucian cultural roots have been deeply associated with the Juche thought in establishing the nation as family.

In this Confucian-oriented Juche culture, some unique ethical system and criteria can be developed. North Koreans reject the absolutism of any single value mainly defined by powerful nations. They claim that they have their own value system based on the ethics of Juche thought. Of course, the values of the particular community should be compatible with the values of the global community, but this would not be a primary concern at present. The primary concern for them is the sustenance of the political autonomy and sovereignty. The virtues of morality and human rights issue need to be interpreted in the framework of *Jajusung* without which moral order would be fundamentally broken down. The idea of the right to self-expression or the idea of the individual having rights of his/her own, develop only in conditions of what they have termed a form of Juche corporatism. In the constant cyclical movement of the mass line with the dynamic combination of centripetal and centrifugal force, all moral decisions are made based on certain communal value, rather than individual interests. Some of the consequences of this particular ethical premise of Juche communitarianism may tend towards moral relativism, but they basically contend that morality cannot be conceived in universal terms. In the communitarian society, the ethical value is conceived of as a substantive conception of the morality which defines the community’s “unique way of life.” The common moral criteria constitute a common culture, which is the precondition of moral autonomy. Therefore, the community’s way of life forms the basis of the “normative conceptions” of the good and the bad on their own terms, and the significance of an individual’s preferences depends on how much each member conforms or contributes to that communal value.¹⁰

North Koreans do think of themselves sovereign not only politically but also morally. They alone can make the judgments of value and others cannot make the common good for them. This does not mean that they totally reject any type of social confirmation from

other communities. They are aware of that all human humanities need considerable social confirmation of others. What they have consistently claimed, however, is that we may need not a single version of the good society. A single criterion of the justice is no longer retainable. Worthwhile freedom requires cultural pluralism in interpreting the virtues of morality. For example, what we might need is for Christians to become better Christians, and humanists to become better humanists, Muslims to become better Muslims, Juche persons to become better Juche persons. Particular minority communities are likely be judged by the majority of the powerful. They recognize the intrinsic connection between power and justice. They understood that their own moral authority stemmed from the universal appeal of their moral principles, as opposed to narrow, local, or parochial appeal only. In this sense, the moral order which prevails over individual autonomy of North Korea should not be simply dismissed as ideological brainwashing.

IV. Toward a Life-centered Unification

The emphasis of Juche has changed over the years, or more accurately, new concepts have been incorporated into Juche, but the basic concepts that hold back the Korean people remain: the commitment to socialism, insistence on achieving economic self-sufficiency, the leader's cult of personality, and political and moral sovereignty. All these ideas are woven together in the cultural framework of the socio-political life towards Juche communitarianism.

IV. Toward a Life-centered Unification of Korea

The communitarian perspective of Juche thought is corrective to the modern liberal notion of self which is based on individualism according to which individuals are self-sufficient outside of community and hence not in need of the cultural context of choice in order to exercise their moral power. A self or individual is profoundly relational in the communitarian society. The relationality of the socio-political life is evidently stated in the Constitution of North Korea in the article of 63: "one is for many and many are for

one.” This one and many logic can be considered to be one of the major characteristics of the postmodern thought. The basic principle of the one and many logic is as follows: The one is always becoming many and the many are always becoming one.

The flow of the socio-political life is here truly “interpenetrating” or “meeting together.” As the prefix “inter” connotes, the socio-political life suggests mutual influence, which suggests a symmetrical relation between one and many. The structure of existence of the life is conceptually and metaphorically monistic-multiplicity, in which the ideas of individuality and unity of life are both fully manifested. The idea of oneness of Juche thought cannot be described as the superordinate one of su-ryong to which the many reduce. In other words, this is not a reduction of a multiple nature of the life, but a production of the multiplicity out of unity. The notion of socio-political life represents the individuality and multiplicity of one and many relationship. The one and many principle represents the totality of reality as a powerful agent of change in which a great multitude of things are integrated into a structured whole of coexistence in Juche thought. The creativity of the socio-political life unifies “many” through its own creative self-constitution, and this can in fact be descriptive of the grounding of the trinitarian ontological unity of the people, party, and su-ryong.

As explained earlier, the communitarian community is more than a mere association; it is a unity in which the individuals are essential members to form a web of the larger life. This membership is neither artificial nor instrumental, but rather spiritual which has its own intrinsic value. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that the cultural and political morality of North Korea can only be defined and defended by reference to the shared values of their own interpretative community. It is equally important for North Korea to be open to the moral dialogue; both intra-dialogue within the community and inter-dialogue among other communities without which the idea of Juche will not be survived in this postmodern world. In order to restore the dynamic movement of the trinitarian cycle, North Korea needs to continue to engage in the process of the vertical and horizontal moral dialogue with other global communities. In this way, as they wish, North Korea becomes the country known for its ideological power which provides the context for the

wholistic liberation of the people and the transformation of every dimension of life in Korea.

¹ Taylor's criticism of Derrida's philosophical approach is clearly stated as follows:

"Nothing emerges from his flux worth affirming, and so what in fact comes to be celebrated is the deconstruction power itself, the prodigious power of subjectivity to undo all the potential allegiances which might bind it; pure untrammelled freedom." Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 249.

² Kim Jong-il, "Socialism is a Science," *Nodong Sinmun*, November 1, 1994.

³ Kim Il-sung, "On Some Problems of Our Party's Juche Idea and the Government of the Republic's Internal and External Policies," *On Juche in Our Revolution*, vol. 2 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975), pp. 425-436.

⁴ Kim Il-sung, "On Some Problems of Our Party's Juche Idea and the Government of the Republic's Internal and External Policies," p. 4.

⁵ Kim Jong-il, *On the Juche Philosophy* (Pyongyang: Korea, 2002), p. 55.

⁶ The metaphor of a bicycle is borrowed from Amitai Etzioni's *New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: HarperCollins Basic Books, 1996).

⁷ Kongdan Oh and Ralph C Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 22-25.

⁸ Alexandre Y. Mansourov, "In Search of a New Identity: Revival of Traditional Politics and Modernization in Post-Kim Il Sung North Korea," in Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002), p. 33.

⁹ Kim Jong-il, "Socialism is a Science," *Nodong sinmun*, November 1, 1994.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.