

Is North Korea's Juche Idea Really Marxist?

Timo Schmitz
University of Trier

Abstract: North Korea's Juche Idea is often portrayed as Stalinist, Maoist or even both, despite the fact that the Juche Idea contradicts even the fundamental outlook of Marxism. In this paper, I first want to show that neither Marxism nor a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist world outlook plays a large role in Jucheist anthropology, but that Juche's people-centered world outlook is of pre-Marxist nature and that the Great Leader Principle is not a Stalinist but a Confucian feature. As such, I will argue that Oh Sei-chull's proposal of classifying Juche as Stalinist and Maoist with feudal characteristics is not accurate, but that North Korea is a feudal monarchy and that Juche *de facto* does not build on a Marxist-Leninist tradition in whatever form.

Keywords: DPRK, North Korea, Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, Confucianism

Marxist or Stalinist?

The Juche Idea is often portrayed as Marxist-Leninist or Stalinist in nature. Oh Sei-chull, for instance, calls it "Stalinism and Maoism with Feudal Characteristics"¹ (Oh 2012). But in fact Juche explicitly rejects the Marxist path. As North Korean author Kim Song Kwon has written, "The rise of Marxism was a turning point. It closed the door of destined fate after smashing the chains of capital, but failed to open the door of true shaping of the destiny" (Kim 2014, 1). Of course, the theories of Marx are discussed in North Korean works. For instance, Kim points out that

[t]hanks to Marxism, the exploited working masses got free from religious illusion and idealistic fiction and came to understand that their misfortunes come not from their fate or revelation of God but from the exploitation of the capitalist class and the capitalist system that defend it. [...] The founders of Marxism divided society into the material and the spiritual. And they produced concepts that the material belongs to social being and the spiritual

¹ Sadly, Oh does not give an actual definition of what he understands as Stalinism and Maoism. He equates Stalinism with Marxism-Leninism in his article at first, and later draws a parallel between the "People's Revolution," which was a bourgeois "Maoist revolution in China," according to him, and the North Korean principle of "People's Democracy" as "forced from above by Stalinism." So does Oh Sei-chull regard Maoism as a Chinese form of Stalinism? I cannot answer this question for sure, although it seems to me that Oh sees Stalinism as the Soviet paradigm and Maoism as the Chinese paradigm for Marxism-Leninism, with the Chinese one building or relying on the Soviet one. Thus, each exists on its own but is not separated in nature. I do not want to dive here into the question whether Maoism is really Stalinist at all or shares a common nature since this is a question on its own and goes beyond the scope of this article.

belongs to social consciousness. They clarified the starting principle that social being defines social consciousness. Since Marxism regarded man as a component part of productive forces, man belongs to the concept of social being, according to Marxist philosophy. This concept does not mean that man is the only social being. In other words, man is in the same position with the material conditions of social life and economic relations (Kim 2014, 23, 53 f.).

As such, North Korea's ideology adopted the religious critique of Marx and his Historical Materialism (but only on the surface, as we will see) and discusses the social role of human beings within a society; however, it rejects any straightforward relationship between human beings and the economy, and therefore does not draw a direct connection between human misery and the economic misery caused by modern capitalism, i.e., exploitation through the accumulation of the means of production in the hands of a few. Misery already existed on an anthropological level because Korea had a caste system in the past, and, therefore, the rank in which one was born determined one's possibilities. As such, North Korean intellectuals argue that it is not the economic situation of the slave, for example, but the "being of a slave" which is responsible for the misery of the slave, as long as the slave remains an object of history and does not turn into a subject by overcoming slavehood and shaping one's destiny on one's own. In contrast, Marx's anthropology, according to North Korean intellectuals, focusses on human beings as a component part of the productive forces, and thus on their economic situation; however, Juche denies the idea that human beings are part of the productive forces (cp. Kim 2014, 54).² Also, Marxist-Leninist ideology is not in the foreground in Juche, despite North Korean publications calling it a "universal truth," as Kim Il-sung said: "When we study the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the history of the Chinese revolution, or the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism, it is entirely for the purpose of correctly carrying out our own revolution" (Kim Il-sung, cited after Sin & Kim 2014, 11). Sin & Kim point out Lenin's October Revolution as a great historical example (Sin & Kim 2014, 61 f.), but do not really go into Lenin's political theories or political activism. Furthermore, there is not a single mention either of Stalin or of Mao in the first volumes of *Exposition of the Principle of the Juche Idea*.³ So North Korean intellectuals do not comprehend Juche in a Marxist-Leninist or Maoist tradition, but accept Marx and Lenin as historical forerunners of revolutionary thought.

A new era of independence?

The Juche Idea teaches a "new era of independence" in which the people as subjects (the literal meaning of "Juche") are the masters of their own destiny and create history on their own, while in the past a dominant class was oppressing and humiliating them, making them an object (and not the subject) of history (Juche Idea Lesson 1). Because Juche places the people in the center as masters who shape their own destiny, they are the source of construction of the country and inherit the power to drive the revolution (DPRK Today).⁴ As such, the Juche Idea is explicitly a people-centered thought "which illuminates the road for the masses of the people to realize complete independence" (Juche Idea Lesson 1). As an ideology which explicitly

² Instead of being part of the productive forces, "man" is a social being who is in social relations in Juche, according to Kim (2014, 54). However, it was already pointed out by Marx that a human being is in relation to others within a society, and therefore this idea is nothing new.

³ Referring to Vol. 1 & 3.

⁴ DPRK Today writes: "주체사상이란 한마디로 말하여 혁명과 건설의 주인은 인민대중이며 혁명과 건설을 추동하는 힘도 인민대중에게 있다는 사상이다. 다시 말하면 자기 운명의 주인은 자기 자신이며 자기 운명을 개척하는 힘도 자기 자신에게 있다는 사상이다."

centers on an anthropological view in which human beings should make decisions on their own and should be free from being dominated, the Juche Idea would seem to have more in common with some form of anarchism or individualism than with communism (Schmitz 2017). In fact, the very key of Juche must have been thought individualistic by the founding elite, but was soon appropriated by Kim Il-sung in a collectivist-understood manner in which independence became the quest for national rather than individual independence (*ibid.*). (And “man” became a generic term free from individual needs.) As such, it is no surprise that the theory is embedded within the aim of the Korean Revolution, which was not focused on liberating the individual, but on the anti-imperialist struggle against Japanese occupation (1910-1945) as part of the revolutionary history of the DPRK and the national liberation movement (*cp.* Juche Idea Lesson 1). The goal of Juche is to fulfill an anti-feudal democratic revolution as a response to the needs of the Korean people (*ibid.*). Needless to say, if Juche were focused on granting civil rights to individuals so that they could shape their own destiny, then it would indeed be a democratic concept, but through the collectivization of the ideology, which is embedded within the Korean Revolution and the Korean Worker’s Party (KWP) as sole representative of the revolution, the practical outcome is not democratic at all (Schmitz 2017). Furthermore, Juche emphasizes self-reliance and condemns the fact that many groups within the national liberation movement sought help from other nations (Juche Idea Lesson 1). This includes both pro-Communist movements and other political factions, as is described for instance in the memoirs of Kim Il-sung (1994, 41), where Kim calls the petition by Kim Kyu Sik and others, presented at the Paris Peace Conference (1919), to lobby for Korea’s independence of Japan, based on the Wilson doctrine of self-determination of peoples, shameful and condemns the effort to rely on a foreign force.

The impossibility of an individual effort?

Ri Kwang Il explains that “Marxism clarified that man’s emancipation cannot be achieved through individual effort, and that the strength of the united working class is the only means for liquidating exploitation and oppression of man by man realizing genuine freedom and equality of man” (Ri 2022 11). This common credo in DPRK propaganda, however, ignores the important factor of individualism within Marxist thought as pointed out by Vitantonio Gioia:

In fact, Marx (especially in his youth) developed an original analysis of individualism, rooted in the structure of modern society. He set himself in continuity with the reflections of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment (Rousseau, Condorcet, Kant, etc.), while criticizing Hegel and many representatives of the ‘Hegelian left’. Nevertheless, it remains true that in the Marxist view the role of the individual has always been pushed towards the background, in order to emphasize the relevance of economic and collective factors (classes, state, political parties, etc.) for explaining social change (Gioia 2019, 1).

Ri is correct to argue that Marx appeals to the collective for revolution’s sake, but the goal in the end is the freedom of every particular individual, who has equal means. However, Ri comes to the conclusion that Marxism failed to put man in the center, when he writes that “all the factors restricting their destiny were not eradicated even though the groundwork for socialism has been provided” (Ri 2022, 13). Thus, Juche reduces the masses to the individual human being (Schmitz 2017), who has the power to apply his effort, without realizing that Marxism tries to do the same through class awareness: the individual has to become aware of one’s class

standpoint to realize the necessity for overcoming classes. The human being as master of one's destiny also has no other choice in Juche than joining the masses to push forward the Korean Revolution. Thus, here we find only a superficial opposition to Marxism: while Juche on the one hand promotes "man" as an individual human being to be in the center, unlike Marx, who focused on a mass movement by laborers to gain control of the means of production, DPRK propaganda transformed "man" into a generic term within Juche, equating the word "man" with "people" or "human beings" in general, instead of referring to a particular person. And as such, there is no longer a focus on the individual in fulfilling the revolution, but a mass of people and thus, once again, a mass movement or, in the Leninist sense, a vanguard party to oversee the revolution, which, unsurprisingly, is the KWP in the DPRK: "It can only be created by a great leader who can have a correct understanding of the demands of the times and give a comprehensive answer to them" (Ri 2022, 14). Yet, Juche explicitly wants to understand itself as a new ideology that is more advanced than Marxism and therefore distances itself from Marxist doctrine insofar as Juche claims to be people-centered, while Marxism is not.⁵ But in fact, this criticism of Marxism cannot hide that Juche is nothing new at all. Kim Jong Il said, "When we say that we look at people as the center and grasp the attributes of people by that, we mean to capture people as being distinct from animals and other beings" (Kim Jong Il, cited after Oh 2012).

Oh Sei-chull rightly points out that Kim Jong Il's people-centered focus can even be found in Feuerbach, who clarifies human beings as rational beings over others, and, thus, Juche is not new or innovative at all (Oh 2012). "After all, the 'person-centered' world-view and the so-called human (attribute) theory are not new rational elements absent from Marxism that emerge along with the 'development of the times'. They are nothing more than an 'irrational element' that Marx had already learned from Feuerbach in the 1840s and criticized and discarded with the development of his own ideas" (ibid.). Even further, the human being in a Jucheist view becomes an abstract and metaphysical being (ibid.). Concerning Stalinism, Juche at least stands indirectly in an opposition to it by pointing out that the Third International failed (Ri 2022, 14). It is also wrong to assume that the DPRK was a Soviet Stalinist satellite state, since the DPRK relied on China in the Korean War.

The Great Leader Principle

The Great Leader Principle is neither based on Stalinist nor on Maoist values, but is indebted to the dynastic principle of the god-like Heavenly Emperor in Confucianism. Oh points out that "Just as mediaeval scholastic philosophy saw its absoluteness in God, and Hegel saw it in the absolute spirit, the Juche idea sees it in the Great Leader" (Oh 2012). However, I would understand the Jucheist leader principle as equating spirit and God, which means that Kim is understood as a living God whose spirit has a superhuman capability, despite the fact that Juche officially proclaims a materialist outlook and shuns Idealism as a wrong worldview

⁵ cp. Naenara 2007: "사람을 단순한 물질적, 생물학적존재나 순수 정신적존재로 보는 비과학적, 반동적견해를 타파하고 인간을 사회적존재로 처음으로 밝힌것은 《사람은 본질에 있어서 사회적관계의 총체》 이라고 한 맑스주의였습니다. 그러나 사람의 본질을 사회적관계의 총체라고 한 맑스주의적견해는 사람이 사회적관계에 의하여 규정되는 존재라는것을 밝혀주지만 사회적존재로서의 사람이 가지고 있는 본질적특성이 무엇인가 하는것은 밝혀주지 못하였습니다. 이것은 사회적존재를 인간활동의 물질적제조조건, 생산방식으로 보고 그에 결정적의의를 부여한 맑스주의의 필연적귀결이었습니다. 주체사상은 사람의 본질적특성을 해명하는것을 중요한 철학적과제로 제기하고 력사상 처음으로 그에 가장 올바른 해명을 줌으로써 사람에게 대한 완벽한 철학적리해를 확립하였습니다."

(Schmitz 2022). Thus, particularly given that both the Stalinist and Maoist factions were purged in the 1950s (Lankov 2002; Hong 2004, 220 f.),⁶ I cannot agree with Oh's conclusion that Juche is Stalinist and Maoist. Concerning Confucianism, we find the Jiwŏn principle – founded by Kim Il-sung's father Kim Hyung-jik, who was a nationalist and traditionalist – as well as the Iminwichŏn doctrine in the Juche idea. The Iminwichŏn doctrine is the Confucian relationship between the emperor and his people (Schmitz 2022). Concerning the first, the Jiwŏn principle can be understood as an element of reformed Confucianism, emphasizing both one's personal need to aim high (the Confucian ideal of learning) and the national self-determination as a result of Japanese occupation. As such, Kim Hyung-jik, following patriotic ideals, appealed to the national liberation movement to set high aims in liberating the nation from the Japanese occupation and restoring the Korean nation's dignity (Kim 1994, 16-31; Kim 2016, 87-93). He explains that this can only be done by relying on one's own nation and not on others, something which was later adopted into Juche. However, Jiwŏn and Iminwichŏn are not essential features of the Great Leader; the Great Leader exists independently from them, but absorbs these Confucian values in ideology, despite not living them practically, since Iminwichŏn presupposes a fundamental respect for the people but, in fact, the Great Leader demands that the people respect him and stay loyal to him to the utmost.

Socialism or Neo-Feudalism?

It is also noteworthy that Aybala Lale claims that “it would be appropriate to say that the North Korean state tradition has socialist thought. As a matter of fact, shortly after Kim came to power, he made efforts to continue his administration of the country with socialism” (2019, 79; my translation with help of Google Translate), and proposes that Juche was influenced by “Marxism-Leninism, Confucianism, Maoism and national Korean traditions” (2019, 78; my translation with help of Google Translate). First, I would argue that the principle of socialism existed in North Korea only on paper and was never actively present. Lale herself points out that the state form increasingly separated from the Soviet Union and China, adopting a “socialism in its own way.” But this new “socialism” was never socialist at all, which can be demonstrated by the overwhelming influence of Confucianism. As she points out herself, “The most important contribution of Confucian thought, one of the most fundamental elements of the Korean political past, to Juche ideology is the disregard of individual interests and the foregrounding of community interests. It is aimed for the society to be together and act as a whole in the light of Confucian principles” (2019, 78; translation mine). This strongly disregards the common principles of socialism in which everyone is equally free. Since North Korea never built its system on Marxism-Leninism or Maoism in practice and already chose its own way in the 1950s, purging Soviet and Chinese influences, Socialism in whatever form never effectively made it into Juche. The best proof of this is the Great Leader principle and the hierarchical structures within Juche which are neo-feudalist rather than socialist.

⁶ Though it is noteworthy that Lankov (2002, 77) suggests that Soviet Stalinism was exchanged for a form of national Stalinism, I think that this is contestable, since the purge of supporters of Soviet Stalinism did not only lie in the fact that they were pro-Soviets, but that they were Stalinists, as I suggest. For instance, in 1955, Kim Il-sung addressed in his speech *On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work* the need for paving an ideological path suitable for the Korean nation. The Maoists in the DPRK had the same fate as the Soviet faction. The Pro-Chinese (Maoist) Yan'an faction was purged in 1956 (cp. also Lankov 2002, 90 ff. on the incidents surrounding this purge).

Conclusion

Juche explicitly rejects Marxism already on the most fundamental basis. Despite praising Marx's Historical Materialism, Juche established its own metaphysics in which the human being becomes a collective, abstract, metaphysical being which is necessarily bonded to the Great Leader and his will. As such, he is officially called the subject of history to fulfill an anti-feudal democratic revolution within the Socialist spirit (where Marx and Lenin are praised as forerunners), but de facto the human being becomes the subject of subjugation and a quasi-feudal object within the nation state, which is devoted solely to the leader. The Great Leader Principle elevates the leader to a position equal to God, thereby legitimizing his power. Given this fact, Juche is not a means for liberating the people, but a means to justify a dynastic feudal monarchy. Even though Stalin and Mao Zedong established their respective cults of personality, the North Korean personality cult does not have its roots either in Stalinism or in Maoism, but in Korea's feudal monarchism. As such, the government even misuses doctrines of reformed Confucianist movements (and progressive Confucianists), coining Confucian terminology in its own way to reinforce the regime's authoritarian rule. To put it in a nutshell, it can be said that the DPRK is not a Socialist state at all (either in a Marxist or a non-Marxist tradition) and does not follow a Leftist tradition, but rather a dynastic feudal monarchy (Kim dynasty) based on Korean nationalism, continuing the ancient feudal reign that was interrupted by the Japanese occupation.

References

- DPRK Today: *영생불멸의 주체사상*. <https://dprktoday.com/policy/150>, retrieved on 9 December 2023.
- Gioia, Vitantonio: "Individualism and Social Change. An Unexpected Theoretical Dilemma in Marxian Analysis." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas [Online]*, 16, 2019, 1-26.
- Hong Yong Pyo: "North Korea in the 1950s: The Post Korean War Policies and Their Implications." *The Korean Journal of International Relations* 44 (5), 2004, 215-234.
- Kim Chang Song: *Allgemeines über Korea, Band 2: Geschichte*. Unter der Redaktion von Kim Ji Ho. Übersetzt von Jong Kwang Nam. Pyongyang: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 2016.
- Kim Il Sung: *With the Century, Volume 1*. Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1994.
- Kim Song Kwon: *Exposition of the Principle of the Juche Idea 1: What is the view of the Juche Idea on the World?* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014.
- Lale, Aybala: "Kuzey Kore'nin Juche İdeolojisi ve Marksizm-Leninizm, Maoizm ile Mukayesesi." *Doğu Asya Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Güz 2019, 66-93.
- Lankov, Andrei: "Kim Takes Control: The "Great Purge" in North Korea, 1956-1960". *Korean Studies* 26 (1), 2002, 87-119.

Juche Idea Lesson 1: The Origin of the Juche Idea. Uploaded by DefendKorea/NatalieRevolts, 27 October 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8whLKb1aOTI&list=PLcfZHutM0BHn7pFHd189R9cGX4Adp2Ik>, retrieved on 9 December 2023.

Naenara: 주체사상강좌-> 주체사상-> 철학적원리: 4. 사람은 사회적존재이다. Naenara, January 2007. http://www.naenara.com.kp/ko/juche/course_juche.php?juche+1+1-04#contents, retrieved on 30 June 2010.

Oh Sei-chull: *Juche: Stalinism and Maoism with Feudal Characteristics*. Internationalist, Communist Perspective, October 2012. <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2022-09-15/juche-stalinism-and-maoism-with-feudal-characteristics>, retrieved on 11 December 2023.

Ri Kwang Il: *Man's Destiny and Juche Philosophy*. Edited by An Chol Gang. Translated by Cha Kwang Hyok and Ri Se Ung. Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2022.

Schmitz, Timo: "The Juche philosophy of North Korea – Philosophical Content and Practical Failure." *Journal of Ethnophilosophical Questions and Global Ethics 1* (2), 2017, 52-57.

Schmitz, Timo: *Das nordkoreanische Wissenschaftsverständnis und die ideologischen Grundlagen der Staatsdoktrin*. Trier & Vachendorf: Graf Berthold Verlag, 2022.

Sin Hyon Suk & Kim Chang Gyong: *Exposition of the Principle of the Juche Idea 3: The Fundamentals of Rise and Fall of Country and Nation*. Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014.

Author

Timo Schmitz received an MA in philosophy and political science from the University of Trier, where he is currently a PhD student in philosophy. Schmitz has two favorite interests that could not be more different: (1) philosophy of antiquity, especially ancient Greece, with a focus on Platonism, and (2) Juche ideology, the state doctrine of the DPRK, its principles and theoretical components as well as its practical outcome. Additionally, he has a great interest in China and its ethnic diversity.



cultural logic

marxist theory & practice



Since 1997

ISSN 1097-3087

<https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/clogic/index>

Editors

Rich Gibson
San Diego State University

Joseph G. Ramsey
University of Massachusetts Boston

Martha Gimenez
University of Colorado (retired)

E. Wayne Ross
University of British Columbia

Gregory Meyerson
North Carolina A&T State University

David Siar
Winston-Salem State University (retired)

Advisory Group

Robert Albritton, *York University, Canada*
Theodore W. Allen, *Brooklyn Public Library*
(1919-2005)

Crystal Bartolovich, *Syracuse University*
Rosalyn Baxandall, *State University of New York,*
Old Westbury

Vladimir Bilenkin, *North Carolina State University*

Jamie Owen Daniel, *Director of Organizing, UPI*
Local 4100, IFT/AFT/AFL-CIO

Anthony Dawahare, *California State University,*
Northridge

Greg Dawes, *North Carolina State University*

Teresa L. Ebert, *State University of New York,*

Albany Barbara Foley, *Rutgers University*

Marcial González, *University of California,*

Berkeley Rosemary Hennessy, *State University of*
New York, Albany

Mike Hill, *State University of New York, Albany*

Peter Hitchcock, *Graduate Center-City University*
of New York

Amitava Kumar, *Vassar College*

Neil Larsen, *University of California, Davis*

John McClendon, *Michigan State University*

Bill V. Mullen, *University of Texas, San Antonio*

Richard Ohmann, *Wesleyan University*

Bertell Ollman, *New York University*

Vijay Prashad, *Trinity College*

Russell Reissing, *University of Toledo*

Modhumita Roy, *Tufts University*

E. San Juan, Jr., *Philippines Cultural Study Center*

Sean Sayers, *University of Kent*

Helena Sheehan, *Dublin City University*

David Slavin, *Westfield State College & Emory*
University

Paul Smith, *George Mason University*

Alan Spector, *Purdue University Calumet*

Michael Sprinker, *State University of New York,*
Stony Brook (1950-1999)

Carol A. Stabile, *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

Richard Stahler-Sholk, *Eastern Michigan University*

Kenneth Surin, *Duke University*

Jeffrey Williams, *Carnegie Mellon University*

Richard Wolff, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

Michael Yates, *University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown*