North Korea’s chuch’e philosophy

James F. Person

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) upholds the concept of chuch’e (also spelled Juche) as the nation’s official political philosophy. North Korea today maintains that chuch’e, often translated as “self-reliance,” is an idea that has “clarified the philosophical principle that the man [sic] is the master of everything and that he decides everything and, on this basis, illuminated the absolutely correct way of shaping man’s destiny.” In this respect, chuch’e turns Marxism-Leninism, which places material conditions as the driving force in historical progress, upside down. Establishing chuch’e, according to official website of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, means “adopting the attitude of a master towards the revolution and construction of one’s country. It means maintaining an independent and creative standpoint in finding solutions to the problems which arise in the revolution and construction. It implies solving those problems mainly by one’s own efforts and in conformity with the actual conditions of one’s own country.” In practice, chuch’e has meant many things over the years and was later transformed into an instrument of autocratic rule, but at the basis of the idea is an effort to promote and sustain an autonomous national subjectivity.

North Korea claims that the concept of chuch’e was original to the country’s founding leader, the anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter Kim Il Sung, who led the country from its founding in 1948 until his death in 1993. This claim is inaccurate, as chuch’e as an expression of national subjectivity had been part of nationalist discourse in East Asia since the late nineteenth century. Following the imposition of the Western nation-state system and post-Westphalian concept of sovereign equality in the late nineteenth century, Japanese scholars, starting with Fukuzawa Yukichi, first imported, translated, and assimilated the term. In Korea, the term emerged as part of a project to produce an autonomous Korean subjectivity by nationalists of every political persuasion concerned with safeguarding, and later restoring, Korea’s national sovereignty. Such individuals included the anarchist historian Sin Chaeho (Sin Ch’ae-ho), conservative Kim Ku, progressive activist Yeo Unhyeong (Yŏ Un-hyŏng), and Marxist historian Paek Namun (Paek Nam-un).

Kim Il Sung reportedly used terms expressing an autonomous Korean subjectivity throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. However, his earliest known use of the term chuch’e was in April 1955, though he is best known for having used the term more extensively in a speech in December of the same year. The speech, entitled “On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism
and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work,” was delivered on December 28 to propaganda and agitation workers following the conclusion of an enlarged plenary session of the Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Korean Worker’s Party (KWP). The speech focused primarily on perceived mistakes in the fields of ideology, literature, and education, but also touched upon problems with North Korea’s foreign relations. The speech bore a distinctive postcolonial nationalist character as Kim called for the formation of a national subject after centuries of Korean leaders willfully subordinated the country to China, followed by decades of Japanese colonial rule. He criticized the work of party propagandists for dogmatism and formalism and a lack of chuch’e, i.e. a lack of national subjectivity, through their mechanical replication and celebration of foreign cultural, economic, and political practices. Examples he gave of these shortcomings included the celebration of foreign literature while ignoring the achievements of Korean writers, not teaching Korean history while teaching Soviet history, and promoting Soviet economic achievements while ignoring the accomplishments of Korea’s own postwar economic transformation. “In our propaganda and agitation work,” Kim noted, “there are numerous examples where only things foreign are extolled while our own are slighted.”

Kim complained of seeing displayed in a democratic hall of culture diagrams illustrating the Soviet Union’s Five-Year Plan, but nothing on North Korea’s own Three-Year Plan; images of the Siberian steppe in a People’s Army rest home; and portraits of only foreign cultural figures, including Mayakovsky and Pushkin, in primary schools. The imitation and glorification of foreign cultural, political, and economic practices conveyed a message to the Korean people that Korea had little of value to celebrate. It was a speech fundamentally concerned with instilling national pride in the Korean people.

Analysts of North Korea have long treated Kim’s use of the term chuch’e in the December 1955 speech as a declaration of a singularly Korean ideology of “self-reliance” and, as such, as a declaration of independence from the Soviet Union and China. It is also treated as the opening salvo in a major attack on Kim Il Sung’s political opponents. The speech has therefore been portrayed as a watershed moment in the ideological history of North Korea. These analyses in many ways reflect the later status chuch’e was given by the North Koreans, but it does not reflect the reality of the period. For one, these interpretations ignore the fact that Kim Il Sung did not use the term chuch’e again until the early 1960s. Moreover, by the time North Korea began to treat chuch’e as an official governing ideology, the idea had transformed significantly. In December 1955, Kim’s use of the term chuch’e was not an expression of a unique and fully-formed North Korean ideology. What is missing from many analyses of the speech is the context in which it was delivered. Two contemporary developments in particular are necessary to consider.

First, following the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in March 1953, the socialist camp, which had become much more diverse after the Second World War, had many problems with which to grapple. The new Kremlin leadership recognized that the differing national perspectives and interests of other socialist countries could not be indefinitely suppressed as they had been under Stalin. Moscow’s relations with Josip Broz Tito’s Yugoslavia epitomized many of the challenges facing the Soviet leadership. Tito had liberated his country from Axis powers with limited direct support of the Soviet Red Army, and therefore felt less compelled to subordinate Yugoslavia’s interests to those of Stalin’s Soviet Union after the war. From 1948, Tito faced the very real prospect of Soviet aggression because of his independence. However, starting in 1955, Nikita Khrushchev lessened tensions with Tito, and began softening the Soviet line on issues such as the universality of the Soviet experience and the Soviet model, and how to account for historical and national peculiarities. This is a process that started in the summer of 1955 with a Soviet–Yugoslav summit. But there were limits to the degree of autonomy and national
distinctiveness Moscow would tolerate. Just over a year after the process of reconciliation with Tito’s Yugoslavia began, Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary to protect socialism against so-called “reactionary elements” of the Hungarian party.

Kim Il Sung, like Tito, believed in the need for greater autonomy and the need to account for national peculiarities. However, when he delivered his speech in December 1955, Moscow was still reconciling with Yugoslavia and continued to struggle with these questions. Accepting differences had not fully become the norm in the socialist camp. It is therefore important not to place too much emphasis on Kim exercising more autonomy and expressing national distinctiveness as part of a Soviet-sanctioned, bloc-wide trend. This is particularly the case because in 1955 Moscow had not been accepting of—and actively sought to thwart—North Korean policies that did not follow the Soviet model. Therefore, Kim’s December 1955 speech was in part an attempt by Kim to minimize Moscow’s ability to impose on North Korea Soviet experiences and models in economic development and culture. He did this by discouraging officials in the ruling Korean Worker’s Party from mechanically replicating Soviet practices. This is the critical context missing from most analyses of the December 1955 speech in which Kim Il Sung used the term “chuch’e.”

Over the previous two years, ever since the Korean War armistice, Kim Il Sung had been engaged in a protracted debate over postwar economic development strategies within the ruling Korean Worker’s Party (KWP). His vision for postwar reconstruction was also directly challenged by the patron allies financing national reconstruction. At stake were principled positions on the vision for a postwar North Korea. On one side of the debate inside the KWP was Kim Il Sung, who did not wish to simply reconstruct the factories destroyed during the war but promoted a policy of general industrialization in an effort to rectify colonial-era distortions to the national economy and to strengthen national security. Kim Il Sung sought to maximize the use of the massive amounts of aid given to North Korea after the war to replace the country’s poorly integrated industrial structure with complementary industries. Through a short-term dependence on foreign aid, Kim sought to establish an independent national economy and prevent future dependency relationships. On the other hand were officials who considered the restoration and expansion of light industry, consumer goods, and agriculture to be the priority for reconstruction in order to rapidly elevate standards of living. This position was inspired by the Soviet “New Course,” the short-lived post-Stalin policy of increasing the production of consumer goods and further developing light industry and agriculture. Those advocating this position were Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans, ethnic Koreans who returned to northern Korea from the Soviet Union and China after the country’s liberation from Japan in 1945. Having spent considerable segments of their lives outside Korea in either the Soviet Union or China, these officials were strong advocates for the economic policies advanced by the more established Soviet and Chinese communist parties.

Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans were also guilty of other forms of foreign emulation that frustrated North Korea’s postcolonial nationalist leader Kim Il Sung. In addition to the portraits of Russian cultural icons in classrooms and murals of Soviet landscapes in resorts for the Korean People’s Army, Soviet-Korean officials in charge of textbook production simply translated Soviet textbooks into Korean without any revisions, even when they contained basic mistakes about Korean geography and history.

Kim Il Sung was also under pressure from his patron allies, particularly the Soviet Union, to modify his postwar economic development strategy. Moscow, which gave one billion rubles in aid to North Korea in 1953, earmarked all but three percent of the aid for specific projects. These included the reconstruction of Japanese-built factories that had been destroyed during the war, but were not located near resources (the Japanese had constructed factories in locations...
convenient for shipping resources to the metropole, but not close to resources). Other projects were focused on the construction of factories that would lead to the improvement of living standards, including textile mills and canneries. The Soviet restrictions on aid to North Korea limited Kim Il Sung’s ability to achieve the goals of his development strategy and eliminate future dependency relationships since Korea would still not be able to produce finished goods. During his frequent meetings with Soviet officials, Kim was encouraged to modify his pro-industry policies. More than the internal KWP debate, Soviet efforts to influence North Korean development strategies reduced Kim Il Sung’s freedom of action and ability to achieve his goals. However, it was the perceived collusion of his domestic opponents with Moscow that likely frustrated the North Korean leader the most.

In December 1955, therefore, Kim Il Sung used the term chuch’e in the speech to admonish Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans for formalistically imitating the policies of larger socialist countries without developing their knowledge of Korean history and customs or familiarizing themselves with local conditions. While there was little he could do about restrictions placed on Soviet aid to North Korea, it was within his power to discourage KWP members who were originally from the Soviet Union and China from mechanically replicating and promoting foreign practices. Kim Il Sung perceived the emulation of Soviet cultural, political, and economic practices as part of a broader problem that was a remnant of Korea’s long history of glorifying the cultures, traditions, and political practices of more advanced neighboring countries, including China, Japan, and from 1945, the Soviet Union. The speech might therefore be interpreted as an attempt by Kim Il Sung to decolonize the Korean mind. For Kim, establishing an autonomous Korean subjectivity meant abandoning sadae, the practice of “serving the great,” observed for centuries toward China, the “middle Kingdom.” His intent was national subject formation and instilling a sense of national pride. This was the start of a campaign to form a unified national will, or subject, which would motivate the behavior of all Koreans, particularly the Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans, in support of national goals.

While Kim Il Sung cannot be credited with introducing the idea of chuch’e as an expression of an autonomous national subjectivity, he can be credited for giving it saliency starting with the December 1955 speech and later when he introduced other terms expressing an autonomous Korean subjectivity in politics, economics, and national defense. Chuch’e would serve as the binding ideology with the practical applications of chaju (independence in politics), charip (self-sustenance in economy), and chawi (self-defense in national defense). The introduction of these ideas transformed chuch’e into a complete set of practical policy applications designed to minimize Soviet and Chinese influence on North Korea.

Chaju, the first of the practical applications of chuch’e Kim introduced, was formally announced in December 1957, though it developed in response to an event that occurred in the summer of 1956. Despite having introduced chuch’e in December 1955 as a way of discouraging Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans from mechanically replicating the political practices of other socialist countries, it was only a matter of months before they once again took inspiration from events unfolding in Moscow and called for political reform in the DPRK. Following the February 1956 Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, scene to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s famed “secret speech” that launched the policy of de-Stalinization, Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans campaigned to limit the cult of personality in North Korea. They did so by directly criticizing the practices of Kim Il Sung and other leading KWP officials, and by encouraging foreign leaders to challenge the North Korean leader directly in meetings during the summer of 1956. When Kim Il Sung failed to respond to these pressures and even dismissed the idea that the DPRK had a problem with the cult of personality, Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans attempted to force
change by raising the matters in a meeting of the KWP CC in August 1956. This political challenge, while never perilous for Kim Il Sung, was greater than the previous economic challenge and demonstrated that these critics would continue to act as conduits of foreign influence as long as they remained in influential posts in the Party. The chief critics were immediately purged from the KWP after the August Plenum. This included four individuals who fled to China, where they informed the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party of the developments in North Korea.

The following month, China and the Soviet Union dispatched a joint party delegation to Pyongyang to investigate the actions of Kim Il Sung. The joint Sino-Soviet delegation directly interfered in North Korean politics by ordering the North Koreans to publish accounts of the August meeting and demanding the reinstatement of those purged and the release of other individuals from prison. These actions greatly disturbed Kim Il Sung, demonstrating the tremendous influence of North Korea’s putative allies over the trajectory of political developments. With Soviet and Chinese officials distracted by anti-communist uprisings in Poland and Hungary in late 1956, Kim Il Sung took measures to minimize the influence of Moscow and Beijing by purging most remaining Soviet-Koreans and China RETURNED Koreans, as well as those who took their orders directly from them. The following year, after Moscow issued a statement on sovereign equality and respect for the internal affairs of all countries of the socialist camp in November 1957, Kim Il Sung declared chaju to be the official policy of the KWP. This measure was designed to impress upon Moscow and Beijing the reality of North Korea’s sovereignty and to minimize their impact on the trajectory of political developments.

The second practical application of chuch’ë, charip, or self-sustenance in economics, was developed by virtue of necessity. In the years after the Korean War, North Korea was utterly dependent on the Soviet Union, China, and other countries in the socialist camp for economic support. Pyongyang was forced to develop self-reliance in economics for two reasons. First, by the time the DPRK was launching its Five-Year Plan in 1957, socialist countries had begun to reduce their post-Korean War aid. This was in part a result of disagreements over the use of aid, but also due to worsening relations after the political events of August and September 1956. The second, and perhaps greater reason, was that North Korea had come under increasing pressure from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries to coordinate production and industrial development through the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). Since the DPRK had not yet rectified colonial-era distortions to its economy, Kim Il Sung resisted pressure to coordinate production with more advanced socialist countries, recognizing that Korea would be discouraged from developing industries already existing in other countries and would instead serve as a source of raw materials. The country would forever remain dependent on foreign countries for finished goods. Just as Joseph Stalin had adopted the autarkic policy of socialism in one country when the Soviet Union was isolated, weak, and vulnerable in the 1920s, Kim Il Sung adopted autarky to prevent the exploitation of North Korean resources.

To compensate for the reduced amounts of assistance, the North Korean leadership mobilized indigenous human and material resources. This was achieved through mass campaigns, such as the Cheonlima (Ch’ollima) Movement, which promoted Kim Il Sung’s voluntaristic vision for achieving the goals of the North Korean revolution, which demanded maximum sacrifice for minimal reward. Through these measures, despite reductions in foreign aid, North Korea achieved the goals of its Five-Year Plan well over one year ahead of schedule. Self-sustenance in economy did not mean self-sufficiency. North Korean leaders understood that they could not produce everything needed. While never integrating into or coordinating development with COMECON, North Korea nonetheless maintained robust bilateral trade relationships with COMECON member countries.
The development of the third practical application of chuch’e, chawi, or self-defense in national defense, was also by virtue of necessity. North Korea’s security was put in jeopardy following the May 1961 coup d’état in South Korea that brought to power the anti-communist military junta of Park Chung Hee. Despite having signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union in July 1961 (and another with China one week later), North Korea became suspicious of Moscow’s credibility as a patron ally following the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which Kim viewed as capitulation to the United States. Kim Il Sung believed his suspicions about Moscow’s credibility and commitment to the security of its ally was confirmed when the Soviets refused to supply the DPRK with 100 million rubles’ worth of military equipment in December 1962. Therefore, from December 1962, North Korea developed autonomous defense capabilities by adopting a so-called equal emphasis policy (p’yŏngjin) line, whereby heavy industry and national defense capabilities would be developed simultaneously, at the expense of consumer goods and light industry. Starting in early 1963, North Korea also began to explore the possibility of developing an indigenous nuclear deterrent. By 1965, the share of expenditures from the national budget allotted to national defense was approximately 30 percent, up from 4.3 percent in 1956. Even after relations with Moscow improved in late 1964, and the Soviets resumed providing North Korea with military assistance, Pyongyang never abandoned its policy of self-defense in national defense, refusing to fully entrust national security to a foreign nation.

In April 1965, Kim Il Sung traveled to Indonesia on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the first Bandung Conference of African and Asian countries. This was the first and only trip he made outside of the socialist camp. While in Jakarta, Kim delivered a lecture at the Ali Archam Academy of Social Sciences entitled “On Socialist Construction in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the South Korean Revolution,” where he gave full articulation to chuch’e as a complete set of practical policy applications. He described chuch’e as a “unique and creative stand which opposes dogmatism and applies the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism and the experience of the international revolutionary movement to one’s country in conformity with its historical conditions and national peculiarities. This represents an independent stand of discarding the spirit of relying on others, of displaying the spirit of self-reliance and solving one’s own affairs on one’s own responsibility under all circumstances.” He similarly described each of the practical applications of chuch’e in politics, economics, and in national defense.

Within two years, however, the chuch’e again underwent a transformation. Starting with the military coup in South Korea in May 1961, North Korea faced multiple threats to its national security. In 1965, South Korea and Japan, both strong allies of the United States, normalized relations as Washington pushed for the creation of a Northeast Asian Treaty Organization. Also, the Sino-Soviet split, which became open in the early 1960s, divided the socialist camp and placed North Korea, which bordered both countries, between a rock and a hard place. As Moscow and Beijing quarreled, from the mid-1960s, the United States rapidly escalated its presence in Southeast Asia. Finally, from 1966, China launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and relations between Beijing and Pyongyang deteriorated to the point of armed clashes along their shared border. North Korea’s status quo had never been more unfavorable.

Yet, starting after the Second Party Conference of the KWP in October 1966—precisely at a time when North Korea faced such perilous security challenges—members of Kim Il Sung’s inner circle began to challenge the continued emphasis on simultaneously developing the heavy industry and national defense sectors of the national economy. They advocated for more investment in light industry and the production of consumer goods to elevate standards of living in the DPRK. To be sure, this was a very sensitive subject. After nearly fifteen years of ambitious back-to-back economic plans and near constant mobilization, North Korea was transformed
from a country devastated by the Korean War to one that was moderately industrialized. It remained far more developed than South Korea until the early 1970s. However, the North Korean people still did not enjoy a quality of life commensurate to the labor they had invested in recovery and industrialization. While there had been plans to focus on improving living standards for the North Korean people at the start of the Seven-Year Plan (originally scheduled for 1961–1967), those plans were indefinitely shelved after the 1961 military coup in South Korea. Critics of the continued focus on heavy industry and national defense, including Pak Geumcheol (Park Kŭm-ch’ŏl) who had been among the most influential officials in the DPRK, engaged in economic populism by traveling throughout the country, delivering speeches declaring the need to drastically improve the lives of the masses after years of sacrifice. Because of the numerous threats facing the country, Kim Il Sung undoubtedly perceived this as a direct challenge to his national security imperatives.

Starting in March 1967, Kim Il Sung took steps to eliminate pluralism in the KWP. He delivered a speech entitled “On Improving Party Work and Implementing the Decisions of the Party Conference,” in which he advocated for enshrining chuch’e as the official ideology of North Korea and for transforming it into a monolithic ideological system (yuil sasang ch’egye). Unless this system was fully established, Kim warned, “it is not possible to ensure the unity of ideology and will.” The establishment of the monolithic ideological system was necessary, Kim argued, to ensure that the KWP would be turned into a “militant organization” that would be capable of “lead[ing] the revolution and construction with success.” He gave examples of disunity in the KWP, such as in 1956, at a time when “Juche was not firmly established.” Kim placed great emphasis in the speech on accepting the orders of the KWP and the leader unconditionally.

In May 1967, Pak and his associates were purged from the KWP during the Fifteenth Plenum of the Fourth KWP CC. Pak’s challenge in 1966 and 1967 in many ways resembled that of the Soviet-Koreans and China-returned Koreans from 1953 to 1956, though Pak did not have foreign backing. Kim took steps to eliminate the possibility of future challenges by transforming chuch’e into a tool for suppressing pluralism. This process was central to the establishment of the Kim Il Sung autocracy. In December 1967, Kim delivered a speech entitled “Let Us Embody the Revolutionary Spirit of Independence, Self-Sustenance, and Self-Defense More Thoroughly in all Branches of State Activity” to North Korea’s rubber-stamp legislative body, the Supreme People’s Assembly. In the speech, he presented a ten-point platform for establishing the monolithic ideological system in North Korea. This required, above all, absolute loyalty to Kim. It also provided specific guidelines for applying the principles of chuch’e to all fields of governance, including politics, economics, and national defense, and also to national reunification, international trade, science and technology, and international affairs. The ten points of the monolithic ideological system eliminated pluralism in the KWP, mandated ideological purity, and made the word of the sovereign, i.e. Kim Il Sung, absolute. This platform became the foundation for idolization of Kim, and turned him into an absolutist, supreme leader. Kim was thenceforth referred to by the title Suryŏng, or “Great Leader,” who would shepherd the masses. Further turning Marxism-Leninism on its head, according to North Korean theorists, it is the Suryŏng who is the leading force of the working class in historical development. The cult of personality surrounding Kim Il Sung was extended to members of his family, including to his son and also to his ancestors. Extreme forms of veneration, including the displaying of lapel pins bearing Kim’s image, became mandatory. Moreover, North Korean authorities took a series of measures to eliminate foreign influences, including banning foreign books and music.

With the introduction of the monolithic ideological system in 1967, chuch’e ceased to become the practical set of policy applications designed to safeguard Korean sovereignty by minimizing North Korea’s chuch’e philosophy
the influence of Moscow and Beijing on the trajectory of political, economic, and cultural developments. It became, for all intents and purposes, a tool of suppression and autocratic rule. North Korea elevated chuch’e to the level of a philosophy or ideology. This was likely, at least in part, to elevate Kim Il Sung to be on par with Mao Zedong, whose own eponymous ideology was being discredited through the tumult of the Cultural Revolution. North Korean propagandists began to refer to chuch’e as “Kimilsungism.” Instrumental in the transformation of chuch’e was Kim Il Sung’s son and future successor, Kim Jong II. The junior Kim was aided in his efforts to utilize chuch’e to establish dictatorial powers even Stalin would envy by a philosophy professor at Kim Il Sung University named Hwang Jang-yop (Hwang Chang-yŏp). For his role in this process, Hwang, who in 1997 defected to South Korea, was known as an architect of chuch’e. In 1972, chuch’e was enshrined in the national constitution as the official ideology of North Korea. In 1974, the ten points of the monolithic ideological system were updated when Kim Jong Il was internally designated successor to his father. The updated ten points established more control over every aspect of life in North Korea. Every point was subdivided, with each demanding absolute loyalty to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong II. Every member of society was expected to memorize and live by these rules.

From the late 1960s, North Korea began to assert that Kimilsungism was a model of politics, economic development, and foreign relations to be emulated in other former colonial and semi-colonial countries. Pyongyang began to support so-called chuch’e study groups around the globe, constructed chuch’e farms in developing countries, and dispatched officials to teach North Korean methods of industrial and agricultural development. North Korea even dispatched instructors to Ethiopia in order to teach the techniques for “mass games,” the synchronized social-realist spectacles that in North Korea glorify the achievements of the Kim family. This experiment to bring chuch’e to the world ultimately failed as the North Korean model itself began to falter in the 1980s. Moreover, the ideas behind chuch’e were so uniquely suited to the particularities of North Korea that even with adaptation, it was difficult to export.

Kim Jong II’s credentials to lead North Korea after Kim Il Sung were in part established by portraying himself as the individual most qualified to interpret his father’s idea. In 1982, the book On the Juche Idea was published in Kim Jong II’s name, establishing him as the final authority over the interpretation of the official state ideology. The same year On the Juche Idea was published, the junior Kim oversaw the construction of the 558-foot Juche Tower (three feet taller than the Washington Monument) in the center of Pyongyang to celebrate his father’s philosophical contribution to the world.

Following the death of Kim Il Sung in 1993, Kim Jong II added to chuch’e by incorporating, in 1996, sŏngun ch’ôngch’i, or military-first politics. Sŏngun, according to Kim Jong II, was a system of politics which “solves all problems arising in the revolution and construction on the principle of giving priority to the military affair and advances the overall cause of socialism relying on the army as the pillar of the revolution.” The need for a military-first policy, according to North Korean propagandists, was the collapse of the socialist camp and the threat posed by US hegemony.

Chuch’e and the North Korean founding leader Kim Il Sung are still central features in the everyday lives of North Koreans. In 1997, North Korea introduced the chuch’e calendar, a variation of the Gregorian calendar starting with the date 15 April 1912, Kim’s date of birth, as year one.

Chuch’e today remains the official ideology of North Korea, though, it has been transformed significantly since Kim Il Sung first used the term in 1955. The idea started as an expression of an autonomous Korean subjectivity, developed into a set of practical policy applications to minimize foreign influence on the DPRK, and was subsequently distorted into a tool of
suppression and autocratic rule. Nonetheless, many of the very postcolonial nationalist ideas inherent to chuch’è early in its evolution in North Korea, including the desire to minimize the impact of larger countries on the trajectory of political, cultural, and economic developments, continue to inform North Korean policies.

Notes

7 Record of a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador in the DPRK, Comrade V.P. Moskovsky, about the negotiations between the Soviet delegation, led by the USSR Council of Ministers, Chairman Kosygin, and the governing body of the Korean Workers’ Party, which took place at the USSR Embassy in the DPRK on 16 February 1965, Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Fond 02/1, folder 96/101, pp. 1–26.
10 Ibid., pp. 116–119.

References


