



From One “Great Leader” to Many Leaders Who Are Truly Great: Leadership Training for North Korean Defectors

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This article explores Ju-che, the official ideology of North Korea, as an intentional inhibitor of leadership development among North Korean citizens. Ju-che is best understood as a religion idolizing Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, who are identified as the “mind” of North Korea, with citizens serving as the body and as “human bombs” sworn to protect the Kims. The Confucian concept of “hyo,” or filial piety, is reconceived to apply no longer to biological parents but only to the Kims as the progenitors of a new and eternal revolutionary family—one where civic adolescence and obedience are extolled and independent choice is vilified. A growing number of defectors to South Korea form a leadership laboratory for studying how North Koreans can be equipped to grow to their full potential as leaders. Attempts to swap the Ju-che ideology for a different leadership theory will be insufficient, since Ju-che is a comprehensive worldview. Though unemployment is high and professional employment is low among defectors, training programs like Seoul USA’s Underground University suggest that a comprehensive strategy of teaching leadership from within the Ju-che framework rather than discarding or ignoring it may prove most effective in promoting leadership growth among North Koreans.

North Korea constitutes a fascinating study for leadership theory in that its Ju-che ideological system institutionalizes the recognition of a single living leader, presently the “Great Leader,” Kim Jong-Il, son of Kim Il-Sung, the “Eternal Father.” Everyone else is conditioned from birth to understand that his or her role is to protect the Kim dynasty as a “human bomb.”¹ Kim is the “impeccable brain of the living body,” by decree of the state and as a central tenet of its belief system, to which all North Koreans must adhere under threat of death.²

In the Ju-che ideology, North Koreans are raised to be the loyal, unquestioning children of Kim Jong-Il, not independent leaders capable of productively and creatively engaging the community of nations.³ Simply put, North Koreans are intentionally trained not to lead but rather to follow passionately, vigorously, and with all their strength.

Though the North Korea government continues to actively suppress the leadership development of its citizens through their birth-to-death immersion in Ju-che, the growing number of North Korean defectors—especially the 20,000 now living as citizens of South Korea⁴—provides the opportunity and the practical need to (1) understand how to help individual North Koreans recognize and develop their own leadership potential and (2) equip these North Korean leaders to train other North Koreans, thereby creating a possible leadership base for a future North Korea that recognizes not only one “Great Leader” but a nation of truly great leaders.

Because of the comprehensive nature of the Ju-che ideology, which is best described as a religion with implications for leadership theory rather than a leadership theory with religious implications, what is required to achieve these goals is not merely the exchange of one leadership ideology for another.⁵ Instead, an incarnational teaching model—one that takes as its starting point the communication of truth into the Ju-che framework with which the North Koreans are indoctrinated from birth, rather than one that rejects or ignores that framework—is recommended.⁶ This will of necessity involve not only leadership training but a guided process of helping individual North Koreans re-think their fundamental identities, role, and purpose in their own lives and in the world. This of necessity raises religious questions, and Christianity—the religion whose terminology, framework, and forms of worship and devotion North Korean ideologists self-consciously melded with Marxism and traditional Confucian values in order to create Ju-che in the first place⁷—is uniquely suited to provide answers.

The experience of international NGO Seoul USA in training North Korean defectors in a Christian worldview and leadership framework may prove instructive in future efforts to reach the growing population of North Korean defectors, as well as in planning for the possible leadership training of an entire people in the event of the collapse or reorganization of the North Korean state.

This article will discuss the Ju-che ideology, the impossibility of shared leadership in Ju-che, and how to teach leadership theory to North Koreans.

The Ju-che Ideology

Ju-che is typically translated into English by the North Korean government as “self-reliance,” though it literally means “subject,” or “one’s own identity.”⁸ Ju-che ideology was first publicly announced to the North Korean people by Kim Il-Sung in 1955 as a uniquely Korean expression of its socialist political identity that differentiated North Korea from ideological allies such as the Soviet Union or China. At the time of its announcement, Ju-che was a broad ideal, not yet a fully-formed and detailed ideology. It lacked the comprehensive idolization of the Kim family that would gradually characterize its content. In its original introduction, it was a combining of Marxist-Leninist thoughts on self-reliance with traditional Korean Confucianism. The elements of the Ju-che personality cult would be gradually fleshed out through public pronouncements and writings over the next ten years.⁹

Park details how the contemporary Ju-che ideology that idolizes Kim Jong-Il as the Great Leader is the direct and intentional product of the need for Kim Il-Sung, the founder of the North Korean

state, to legitimize his successor. “Ju-che Ideology as it relates to [Kim Jong-Il’s] regime was based in Kim Il-Sung’s Ju-che Ideology that has stood for forty years. What are the contents of Ju-che Ideology? Ju-che Ideology is composed of four theories. The four theories are ‘the theory of the revolutionary leader,’ ‘the theory of social-political life,’ ‘the theory of the great socialist family,’ and ‘the theory of revolutionary morality.’”¹⁰

Because of its comprehensiveness, regulation of minute details of everyday life, and absolute devotion to a single, supreme, and infallible leader, the Ju-che ideology is best understood not as a political or leadership theory but rather as a cult. The Seoul Summit noted, “Worshipping idols were [sic] normally implemented in religion or superstition and the term ‘Idolization’ was used in the sphere of religion rather than in social politics. But the Idolization of Kim Jong-Il and Kim Il-Sung in the North Korean society have now reached the status of a religion.”¹¹

Even Hwang Jang-Yop, the acknowledged architect of the Ju-che ideology who melded into it Christian elements of worship and theology ranging from the creation of a Ju-che “trinity” to weekly services of public devotion to sacred writings and a hymnal extolling the greatness of the Kims, was ultimately forced to defect in order to save his life; there was no space in Ju-che for a mind independent of the Kims, even the mind of the one who architected the system.¹² Hwang defected to South Korea in 1997 by entering the South Korean Embassy in Beijing, seeking political asylum. He was publicly labeled a traitor in North Korea, and two assassins were dispatched to “slit the traitor’s throat” in April 2010; however, they were apprehended by the South Korean police before they could accomplish their task.¹³

Though Ju-che is said to mean “self-reliance,” the content of Ju-che is self-avowedly designed to ensure that North Koreans live in a state of permanent childhood, obeying the “Great Leader” as the only parent and leadership figure deserving whole-life devotion.¹⁴

Ju-che and the Impossibility of Shared Leadership

As “Suryong,” or Great Leader, Kim, Jong-Il is the one mind of North Korea.¹⁵ The role of everyone else is to obey. One consequence of this philosophy is that leadership involving independent thought is equivalent to disloyalty. North Koreans are trained *not* to be leaders.

“Hyo” is a concept that originates in Confucianism, but its adaptation and redefinition in Ju-che gives the system one of its most characteristic elements: the idealization of the permanent adolescence of the North Korean people under the fatherhood of the Great Leader. Explains Park, “[T]he hyo of ‘obedience’--emphasized at most in the filial piety of oriental and western beliefs--states that children should follow the will of their parents sincerely in order to please their parents in daily life and to follow their parents’ wishes.”¹⁶

But in Ju-che ideology, hyo is redefined and transplanted from family life into the political and civic sphere. In the Ju-che founding story, North Korea is established through a revolution led by the Kim family. As the creators of a new “family,” the Kims become the permanent parents of a nation of children. Writes Park, “The theory of the great family asserts that the real parent is the captain leader in the great family. Why is Kim Il-Sung the real father? Because Il-Sung Kim

recovered the rights of the country and allowed the North Korean people to be the master instead of the slave.”¹⁷

Because of his “blood relationship” with his people, they coexist eternally, “whether in life or death, sorrow or happiness.” As the “captain leader,” Kim is not only the supplier of political life, but of physical life as well.¹⁸ All possessions of North Koreans--from their houses to their food to their clothing to even the candies and cookies given to children on the Kims’ birthdays¹⁹—are provided not by one’s parents but rather by the Great Leader himself. In return, people need to repay with their “hyo” their captain leader, as father and “bestower of life.”²⁰

Just as the child follows the will of the parent in order to please the parent, the North Korean citizen is trained from birth that he or she exists to further the Kims’ revolutionary agenda. As Park notes, “Jung-Il Kim emphasized that children who honor the father Il-Sung Kim had a duty and a disposition to be revolutionary warriors. As Kim Jong-Il said, hyo--the devoted son/daughter—gives all loyalty to the captain leader as their father, keeps his commands and helps achieve his political agenda. In this meaning, Hyoja, the great family, must follow the father-captain leader's commands, protect the father's well-being, and give pleasure or contentment to father.”²¹

Not only is individual leadership drilled out of North Koreans politically and civically; it is systematically eliminated in one’s personal life as well. Martin notes, “[A]ny stray impulses to go in a different direction would be rooted out. Children in a socialist society, Kim said, should be guided ‘to reject individualism and selfishness, love the organization and the collective, and struggle devotedly for the sake of society and the people and the party and the revolution.’”²²

This discouragement of individualism extends even to the bedroom. Demick interviewed a North Korean defector, “Mi-ran,” about her relationship with her former boyfriend in North Korea. “It took us three years to hold hands. Another six to kiss,” Mi-ran said. “I would never have dreamed of doing anything more. At the time I left North Korea, I was twenty-six years old and a school teacher, but I didn’t know how babies were conceived.”²³

Demick describes how the message of permanent adolescence and unquestioning obedience is reinforced everywhere North Koreans look. “[R]ed is reserved for the lettering of the ubiquitous propaganda signs. The Korean language uses a unique alphabet made up of circles and lines. The red letters leap out of the gray landscape with urgency. They march across the fields, preside over the granite cliffs of the mountains, punctuate the main roads like mileage markers, and dance on top of railroad stations and other public buildings.” Representative of the propaganda signs is the common, block-lettered “WE WILL DO AS THE PARTY TELLS US.”²⁴

Ju-che self-consciously aims to create not leaders but rather permanent, loyal children and human bombs. Parry illustrates: “All the officers and men of the KPA (Korean People’s Army) should . . . prepare themselves to be human bombs and fighters ready to blow up themselves in order to defend the headquarters of the revolution.”²⁵

How to Teach Leadership Theory to North Koreans

By the design of the North Korean government, Ju-che is the only leadership “education” North Koreans ever receive; however, a growing number of North Koreans have escaped from their homeland, becoming citizens of South Korea. As researcher Im Sun Hee from the Korea Institute for National Unification notes, these North Korean defectors are a strategic group in that they represent possible post-Ju-che leaders for North Korea: “During the process of reunification and post-reunification, the people who will play the biggest role are defectors. We need to establish surroundings in which defectors can take responsibility and have a sense of duty for the reunification period.”²⁶

The number of North Koreans who have defected to South Korea has soared in recent years. In 2007, the North Korean defector population in South Korea was 10,000. On November 11, 2010, the total number of North Korean defectors in South Korea reached 20,000.²⁷

Not only are North Korean defectors not entering leadership roles upon their arrival; more than half are out of work. Statistics from the Korea Institute for National Unification note that only 48.6% of North Korean defectors are economically active, compared to 61.3% of the total South Korean population. Of the fewer than 50% of North Koreans who are employed, nearly 40% are laborers; 4% work in service positions; 3% serve in the military or perform a trade. Only 4% are in administrative or professional positions.²⁸ The unification ministry hypothesizes that the high rate of unemployment is due to a combination of factors including unwillingness to work, poor health, difficulty adjusting to the pace and work habits required in a modern economy, and the need to raise children.²⁹

This research indicates that there is more at issue here than the need to swap Ju-che for a South Korean theory of leadership. As North Korean activist Rev. Simon Seo indicates, a comprehensive solution is required to help North Koreans migrate from dependency to self-sufficiency and leadership: “Although we have educated North Korean defectors to have a new faith toward the free world after getting out of North Korea’s Ju-che ideology, their suffering still exists and societal problems still occur. In order to get out of this vicious condition, we need to give the opportunity for special education to the 20,000 defectors in the areas of character, actual degree procurement, and general ability to function in a technological society so that they will be able to serve as active leaders in North Korea at the time of unification.”³⁰

Psychological barriers inherent in growing up in a highly-indoctrinated society must be surmounted in the process. Chun analyzed North Korean society and people from his perspective as a psychiatrist in order to come to a deeper understanding of the mindset of North Korean defectors who have come to South Korea since 1994. Despite North Koreans speaking a language that is principally the same, and sharing the same ethnicity as well as much of the same history with South Koreans, Chun reports that defectors struggle mightily to make the mental adaptation to South Korean society. “Here we need to think about the most important pre-condition [for decision-making], which is that North Koreans were born and grew up in North Korea. In other words, when any problem arises, they exhibit tendencies characteristic of North Korean solutions, not South Korean ways of thinking. Therefore, as South Korea prepares for

reunification, there are many lessons that need to be learned with regard to these problem and solution attempts.”³¹

Rev. Kang Chul-Ho, a North Korean defector who pastors the Seoul-based Saetermin Methodist Church (which is composed of North Korean defectors), says that leadership education must begin within and be comprehensible to someone raised in the Ju-che framework; it cannot begin with South Korean assumptions or with the luxury of a blank-slate mind on which new leadership concepts can be etched. Global concepts must be able to be expressed in the language and mental framework of Ju-che not because Ju-che is right, Kang contends, but because it is the only frame of reference North Koreans possess. He explains, “Instead of saying, ‘Ju-che is wrong,’ I say, ‘God is the real ‘Great Leader,’ and God’s system of Ju-che [“self-reliance”] can lead them to actual self-reliance. They already feel the internal contradictions in Ju-che, so I help them resolve those contradictions rather than insisting to them that their whole framework must be discarded”.”³²

In other words, an incarnational approach to comprehensive training is recommended. Such an approach is quite compatible with Christianity, a religion which contends that God became human in Christ and conveyed truth incomprehensible to humans in the only framework they could understand—that of fallen humanity. Mark’s description of Jesus in Mark 4:33-34—“With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable” (NIV)—underscores Jesus’ strategy of explaining the true and the unseen by referencing only that which fallen humanity could see and understand. The analogy is not perfect with regard to teaching North Koreans—i.e., all human systems, not only Ju-che, are fallen to some degree, and Jesus talks about using parables to conceal understanding as much as to reveal it (cf. Matthew 13:10-15)—but the possibility of incarnating truth within even the most broken system or human being is a necessary corollary of Jesus’ own incarnation.

Conclusion

Seoul-based NGO, Seoul USA, the organization at which the author serves as president, operates Underground University, a one-year leadership training program for North Korean defectors in South Korea. Classes began last year with 15 defectors. Another 15 are being trained this year. Classes meet two nights a week for four hours each night. Instruction takes the form of facilitated discussion, with facilitators drawn from North Korean, South Korean, and American backgrounds. Subjects range from the fundamentals of Christian discipleship to project management to leadership training in a one-week intensive wilderness environment.

It is too early in the process to evaluate the success of the training or its impact on individual students’ concepts of leadership other than to note anecdotally that 100% of students in the first year’s class received offers of professional level employment prior to graduation from the program, and all remain gainfully employed through the present time.

Still, research-level evaluation would require control groups based on prior levels of educational attainment, proper administration of Likert scale surveys to measure individual changes in

attitudes toward not only leadership but towards self, and longitudinal evaluation according to agreed-upon measures of leadership success. None of these are presently in place, because the questions of what to measure and how to measure it are very real ones. However, though they are beyond the scope of this article, these questions and their answers are very important to the future of not only the Underground University program, but also to North Korean leadership training in general.

What is important to note is that the effort to equip individual North Koreans to become truly great leaders is underway. That in itself is a kind of victory, though it is hardly uncontested. North Korea ministry specialist Mr. Choi Young-Hoon notes, “The North Korean government struggles with the ‘Prequip’ leadership radio program that Seoul USA broadcasts into North Korea on short wave radio each night. That broadcast says, ‘God creates everyone to serve as a leader.’ This means that you can be a leader in whatever God calls you to do. In North Korea, only one leader is called, ‘Leader.’ This is why the North Korean government consistently attempts to jam the radio signal to prevent its population from hearing the broadcast.”³³

It is worth noting that the Seoul USA leadership broadcast ministry itself and the research necessary to recognize and overcome the attempts by the North Korean government to jam the broadcast were originated by a North Korean defector.

About the Author

Hyun Sook Foley co-founded Seoul USA in 2002, in order to build bridges of understanding between North and South Korea and the church in the West. Foley graduated with a bachelor’s degree in international business from Dong Duck University and holds a master’s degree in traditional Korean dance from Sungkyukwan University. She completed her master’s degree in clinical therapy from Colorado Christian University, including a special focus on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among North Korean refugees. She is presently studying for her doctorate in leadership from Regent University in Virginia.

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