

# The Korean Ideology: Marxism and Juche

By Kenny Coyle



## PART I: APPLYING MARXISM-LENINISM "IN A CREATIVE MANNER"?

TWO YEARS ago, in *Asia: Imperialism and Resistance*,<sup>1</sup>

I tried to provide a communist perspective on the history and

current situation of south-east and north-east Asia. While,

in relation to the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea

(DPRK or North Korea), I defended the country's

resistance to imperialism, I wrote critically about the

*Juche* idea and the hereditary succession of power within the

Kim family. To quote from the pamphlet:

"Initially the *Juche* theory was presented as a creative application

of Marxism-Leninism to Korean conditions. But, especially after

1990 and the collapse of the USSR, this view

has been replaced by the argument that *Juche* is an entirely

different from and superior to Marxism-Leninism, which is now officially regarded as outdated and limited.

This sidelining of Marxism creates substantial barriers to the renovation of the DPRK,

whose economic reconstruction demands ideological and political re-direction.

In North Korea,

the role and activities

of the late Kim Il Sung and his son and current

DPRK leader Kim Jong Il are exaggerated

to superhuman proportions.

In many newly independent countries after World War II,

the founders of the new states were often

lionised as 'fathers of the nation'. In the

past couple of decades, in the Philippines,

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India,

Singapore, Indonesia and Burma, presidents

and prime ministers have taken positions

held by their fathers, mothers or even

grandfathers. Political clans are hardly

unknown in the West either, think of

the surnames Bush, Kennedy or Clinton.

The DPRK is not unusual in this

exception that it is the only avowedly socialist

state to follow this pattern. The answer

to this perplexing reality of 'Korean-style

socialism' lies more in its Koreanness than in its socialism.

The practice of passing leading political positions

from father to son has no basis in Marxist theory, instead it

reflects a survival of

traditional Korean values influenced

by Confucian feudal doctrines,

where devotion to parents and respect

of patriarchy are considered admirable

virtues. Such values are still alive in South

Korean society as they are in the North,

but the DPRK has raised the 'cult of the

family' into a political programme.

Hereditary positions are incompatible with

democratic centralism and collective

leadership as well as the concept of scientific

socialism." A short time after the

pamphlet was published, Kim Jong Il died and his son Kim

Jong Un took on the position of *swuyong* (supreme leader),

an unprecedented example of dynastic succession in a self-

proclaimed socialist state. In this article, I want to

develop these critical points by more detailed reference

to the *Juche* idea, its origins, indigenous traditional

influences and its changing relationship with Marxism.

In a highly ideological society such as North Korea, this is

crucial in determining how the DPRK acts and will

develop. Far from being the

"last bastion of Soviet-style

communism", as the BBC has described it, or "one of the

last holdouts of 'unreformed' Marxism-Leninism", as one

US academic put it, North Korea has instead gradually

replaced Marxism with a unique and quintessentially

Korean ideology that defies such simplistic

characterisations.<sup>2</sup> I want to stress that the

focus here is on ideology and politics, not wider issues

of North Korea's economic prospects and the threat to

peace on the Korean peninsula. Any broader analysis of North

Korea suffers from the lack of trustworthy data available

on economics, as the country publishes little in the way

of statistics, and even less readable information on its

political life. It has rewritten the biographies of its leaders

and promotes ridiculous glorification of them.<sup>3</sup> Yet, at the same time,

the opacity of North Korea is matched by a Western propaganda onslaught, often

originating with South Korea which stretches the limits of

gullibility but is quickly taken up by our mainstream media.

To illustrate:

"John Delury, an expert on North Korea

at Yonsei University in Seoul, noted numerous

eye-catching stories in South Korean and Japanese media

about the regime,





and particularly Kim, that relied on an anonymous, single source, often from intelligence services. "This stuff gets planted regularly in media outlets and then quickly goes viral," he said. "There's a global appetite for any North Korea story and the more salacious the better. Some of it is probably true — but a great deal of it is probably not. "The normal standards of journalism are thrown out of the window because the attitude is: "It's North Korea — no one knows what's going on in there." "4

So, in this article, I want to concentrate on how the North Koreans themselves have

presented and transformed their ideological positions, relying largely on their own words, and ask what this will mean for the country's future direction.

### 1. Ideology in Transition

In the former European socialist countries, during the process of capitalist restoration in 1990-91, we were dissolved, renamed or refounded as social-democratic parties, leaving Marxist-Leninist forces to regroup in new parties. This process is worthy of detailed analysis but it clearly does not apply to Korea, where the ruling party, the Workers Party of Korea (WPK), and the DPRK remain apparently intact.

A similar conversion could be seen in three former Portuguese colonies in Africa, where the national liberation movements had declared themselves Marxist-Leninist parties during the 1960s and '70s. Mozambique's Frelimo dropped Marxism completely at its fifth party congress in July 1989, the Angolan MPLA at its third congress in 1990 and the PAICV of Cape Verde the same year. All three parties are now members of the Socialist International. While the MPLA and Frelimo continue to be the governing parties, they won contested elections and have opened their economies up to foreign capital on a large scale. The DPRK does not fit this experience either.

We could invoke the example of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party turned ruling social-democratic Cambodian People's Party. As with Angola and Mozambique, Cambodia's political system was modified following complex peace agreements with former guerrilla opponents, but its economy is still largely rural and the CPP has overseen a transition to a fully market economy, unlike the DPRK. There are also the models of China and Vietnam, which have moved from fully centrally planned economies to socialist market economies respectively. Both ruling parties have spent several decades promoting extensive economic reforms while maintaining that they remain guided strategically by Marxism-Leninism. Again this does not fit the DPRK. So, North Korea has to be understood primarily in its own terms. To take this further we need to look at key issues, first the specific characteristics of the Korean national question and second the nature of the Korean revolution itself.



## 2. The Korean National Question

Koreans both north and south are fond of boasting that Korea is a 5000-year-old-civilisation begun by a King Tangun, supposedly born around 2333 BCE,<sup>5</sup> founder of Old Choson.<sup>6</sup> This claim says more about the national sensitivity of modern Koreans, surrounded as they have been by the larger more powerful civilisations of Japan and China, than it tells us about the ethnic identity of the peninsula's inhabitants several millennia ago or the character of the societies they lived in. We have no written evidence until the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when Old Choson and some other kingdoms and city states were mentioned in Chinese chronicles.

One North Korean press article described Tangun's creation of Old Choson as an "epochal occasion in the formation of the Korean nation". As a result, "the Koreans are a homogeneous nation who inherited the same blood and culture down through history".<sup>7</sup>

We are on more solid ground if we say that the formation of a distinctly Korean ethnic identity and the establishment of the first united and relatively independent Korean state was broadly completed by around 1000 CE. As historian Bruce Cumings writes:

"Few of the world's peoples live in a nation with no significant ethnic, racial or linguistic difference. Korea is indeed one of the most homogeneous nations on earth, where ethnicity and nationality coincide. It is pleasant for the Koreans to think they were always that way; it is a dire mistake to think that this relative homogeneity signifies a common 'bloodline' or imbues all Koreans with similar characteristics."<sup>8</sup>

Developing in the shadow of China and Japan, Korean culture was initially more heavily influenced by China. Some 60% of modern Korean vocabulary is of Chinese origin, and for centuries educated Koreans preferred to use Chinese characters; although a Korean writing system, Hangeul, better suited to the language, was created during the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> Buddhism and Confucian philosophy permeated Korean society via peaceful contact, as well as through temporary occupations and invasions by the Chinese, but these absorptions were largely done in a way that transformed rather than replaced Korean identity. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Korea was a separate tributary state, accepting Chinese overlordship but essentially ruling itself.

In Japan, by contrast, Korea was the source of inspiration for a whole variety of Japanese cultural areas, such as architecture and cuisine. Buddhism was introduced to Japan by Korean monks; and the migration of Korean clan chiefs to Japan, where they set up their own fiefdoms, seems to have been substantial as long as 1,500 years ago. Ironically the shared origins of Japanese and Korean cultures and peoples became a rallying cry of Japanese racial nationalists and their Korean collaborators in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to justify Korea's absorption into the Japanese empire.

The traumatic experience of Japanese occupation has been a defining element in shaping modern Korean identity. Japan's domination over Korea began in 1876, when it forced the opening of Korea's economy to Japan's rapidly developing capitalist industries, eventually turning the country into a colony from 1910 to 1945. Korean personal names were gradually suppressed as the Koreans were expected to imitate the manners and outlook of their

Japanese 'elder brothers'.<sup>10</sup> Japanese colonialists frequently employed much the same imperialist stereotype of the colonised as those adopted by Western powers – the lazy and feckless native. This not only reinforced Japanese attitudes of superiority but also justified the imposition of strict and at times forced labour discipline. One Japanese writer claimed:

"Korean labourers excel our countrymen in stature as well as in physical strength. However, they are extremely lazy. They get up and go out for work only when they feel hungry, but even then, as soon as they quench their hunger for the day, they begin to think about going home and having a nap. They do not know how to save things, nor do they have any will to change their dispositions."<sup>11</sup>

The forcible assimilation of the Koreans was accelerated in the 1930s as Japan geared up for war and needed recruits for its imperial army and war industries. Japanese became the main language of instruction in schools; pro-Japanese indoctrination and campaigns were waged to support the emperor. Collaboration with Japanese colonialism had a strong class bias, being widespread among large landowners and business people; but it also provided social mobility for others, if they were willing to serve in the ranks of the imperial forces. Some Koreans volunteered for their imperial masters: for example, Park Chung-hee, South Korea's dictator 1963-1979 and father of the current South Korean president Park Geun-hye, served as an officer using his adopted Japanese name Takagi Masao. Other Koreans opted for resistance. However,

## 3. North Korean Revolution

Korea's revolution emerged rapidly after the surrender of Japan in August 1945 and the Red Army.<sup>12</sup>

Far East where they were incorporated into the Soviet forced Kim's guerrilla units to prominence as a fighter. Japanese repression eventually that Kim Il Sung first came during the anti-Japanese war these ethnic Korean units. It was as a leader of one of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Red Army. found their way into the ranks thousands of ethnic Koreans Manchuria, there was a large of instruction in schools; pro-Japanese indoctrination and campaigns were waged to support the emperor. Collaboration with Japanese colonialism had a strong class bias, being widespread among large landowners and business people; but it also provided social mobility for others, if they were willing to serve in the ranks of the imperial forces. Some Koreans volunteered for their imperial masters: for example, Park Chung-hee, South Korea's dictator 1963-1979 and father of the current South Korean president Park Geun-hye, served as an officer using his adopted Japanese name Takagi Masao. Other Koreans opted for resistance. However,

In Japanese-controlled heavy losses. Korean communists suffered repression, Soviet-based and, during the Stalin-era, given with factionalism; communist movement was China. The pre-war Korean of the Soviet Union and in were formed on the territory Korean communist groups counterparts. The first Korea that was achieved by never became the force within groups failed to form an effective united front and





Mao Zedong 1st Chairman of the central committee of the Communist Party of China, with Nikita Khrushchey, during the Soviet leader's 1958 visit to Beijing



The first test of *juche* came during the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. Most of the Asian communist parties took a critical line against modern revisionism, and initially shared many of the Chinese criticisms of the CPSU's line.

the climax of two competing visions of Korea's future. Two rival systems clashed, one intent on restoring the old order, the other seeking to mould a new nation. Both attempted to present the other as a creature of foreign powers. Each based its legitimacy on its claim to represent authentic Koreaness.<sup>14</sup> With the exception of Vietnam, no other 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist revolution was so closely entwined with the anti-colonial revolution as that of Korea. Yet Korea exhibited features quite different from Vietnam. Despite their heroism, Korean revolutionaries had not been instrumental in the defeat of the Japanese. The Koreans had no Dien Bien Phu. As arriving Soviet Red Army in Eastern Europe, it was the that directed the dismantling of the colonial state. In his 1955 speech, ironically where he first outlined his *juche* philosophy, Kim Il Sung referred to the Soviet Union as "our liberator".<sup>15</sup> During the Korean War, the North came within weeks of defeating the South Korean forces, only to find driving their forces into retreat. It was then the decisive intervention of China that blocked the US and its allies. The Korean revolution had the Soviet Union to thank for its birth and the Chinese for its rescue. Following the

"In 1954, 33.4% of North Korea's state revenue came from foreign aid; in 1960, the proportion was down to a paltry 2.6%. By contrast, well over half of South Korea's government revenue came from foreign assistance in 1956. By the early 1960s, well before South Korea's industrial take-off, the North had impressively re-industrialized. This difference cannot be explained by foreign aid alone, which was far greater in absolute terms in South Korea than in the North. The regime's ability to mobilize the North Korean population was also indispensable for the success of this project."<sup>16</sup>

The DPRK made substantial progress in reconstruction and racial ascendance of many other Asian countries in terms

While the people's committees in the South were suppressed, and leftists and radical nationalists imprisoned it was landlords, Japanese collaborators and anti-communists who were subject to repression. Since large estates and industries were mainly owned by Japanese colonialists and collaborators, radical land reform and the nationalisation of industry was carried out peacefully with popular support. Anti-illiteracy campaigns, public health programmes, and promotion of science and technology, women's rights and so on were all part of a determined effort to create a new modern Korea in the North. This process of social revolution from above and below is well described in Charles K Armstrong's *The North Korean Revolution 1945-1950*, which illustrates that, although the WPK and DPRK's emergence owed a great deal to Soviet direction, of his life in the United States, was gradually elevated to a position of supreme political power by the US. Former collaborators were given a clean bill of health and started to re-fill the business boardrooms and military garrisons.

swif arrival of Soviet armed forces in the North, and later the US military in the South. The division of Korea at the 38th Parallel had already been decided by the US before the war's end. As Japanese rule collapsed, local people's committees sprang up across the country, often with strong nationalist and communist participation. These were essentially spontaneous grassroots takeovers of government functions from the Japanese colonial regime and its local collaborators. In the North, tens of thousands of Koreans returned from China and the Soviet Union. Many had served in the ranks of the Chinese or Soviet Red Armies. The future founder of the DPRK and leader of the ruling Workers Party of Korea, Kim Il Sung, had done both. In the South, which proclaimed itself the Republic of Korea in 1948, Syngman Rhee, a returned conservative academic who had lived most of his life in the United States, was gradually elevated to a position of supreme political power by the US. Former collaborators were given a clean bill of health and started to re-fill the business boardrooms and military garrisons.





of urbanisation and industrialisation until the 1980s, when accumulating economic problems again created a period of renewed reliance on Soviet assistance, so that 50-60% of the DPRK's foreign trade was with Moscow. When the USSR collapsed, North Korea lost its main trading partner and oil supplier, leading to a substantial crisis in the economy.<sup>17</sup> Then, in 1995-8, a series of natural disasters hit the country, overwhelming the exhausted agricultural system and food production, and resulting in the deaths of at least half a million people. The DPRK has still not fully recovered and remains reliant on foreign aid to feed itself.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. The Three Stages of *Juche*

Central to the North Korean world view is the concept of the '*juche*' idea. The word '*juche*' itself is often loosely translated in Western literature as 'self-reliance', but as Armstrong points out:

"*Juche* literally means 'to rule the body' or master the 'essence' ... *Juche* is sovereignty as individual dignity, and its loss is shame in a very personal Confucian sense. There is also a certain religious aspect to the elevation of the nation, the leader, and the party to a state of immortality and transcendence."<sup>19</sup>

As Cumings has also stressed, the concept embodies more than simply self-reliance in foreign policy, defence, economics, ideology or culture. Most countries which have experienced colonial domination have

North Korean postcard reads: to live for and protect one's country is the greatest patriotism



likewise sought self-reliance; indeed no country would want to think of itself as dependent and relying on others, the concept of a state after all resting on sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> The '*juche*' idea has evolved in three stages. In the first period, approximately from 1955 to 1975, *juche* was presented as the creative application of Marxism-Leninism to Korean conditions, a fairly unremarkable proposition. In the second period, beginning in the mid-1970s, *juche* was proposed as an original theory that represented a major advance on Marxism-Leninism, which was portrayed as a flawed and outdated theory. Today, however, Marxism has been painted out of the picture pretty much altogether. Despite some recent attempts to claim that Kim Il Sung outlined the *juche* idea as far back as 1931, his first major speech pushing *juche* to the fore was in December 1955, and the timing was significant. First, it was made at a time when he faced a series of inner-party challenges to his style of rule and growing personality cult. The Soviet Union was already undergoing Khrushchev's

'de-Stalinisation thaw' and was just months away from the bombshell 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, where Stalin's cult of personality came under fire. Until a showdown August plenum in 1956, Kim's opponents lobbied for Soviet support, either to clip Kim's wings or to remove him. Kim was aware that his opponents had visited the Soviet embassy and met with visiting Soviet diplomats. In Moscow, the DPRK's ambassador was so opposed to Kim that he eventually asked for and received political asylum in the USSR.<sup>21</sup> Second, after Stalin's death Mao Zedong was at a high Chinese military support had proved decisive in saving the DPRK from defeat by the US in the Korean war. Kim was faced with both pro-Soviet and pro-WPK and *juche* was a means of outflanking both these dogmatists divorced from Korean realities. In his speech to party agitators, Kim Il Sung outlined his stance:<sup>22</sup>

"It is important in our work to grasp revolutionary truth, 'de-Stalinisation thaw' and apply it correctly to the actual conditions of our country. There can be no set principle that we must follow the Soviet pattern. Some advocate the Soviet way and others the Chinese, but it is not high time to work out our own? ... Just copying the forms used by others instead of learning Marxist-Leninist truth brings us no good, only harm. Both in revolutionary struggle and in construction work, we should firmly adhere to Marxist-Leninist principles, applying them in a creative manner to suit the specific conditions of our country and our national characteristics. If we mechanically apply foreign experience, disregarding the history of our country and the traditions of our people and without taking account of our own realities and level of preparedness of our people, dogmatic errors will result and



The first rest of *juche* came during the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. Most of the Asian communist parties took a critical line against modern revisionism and initially shared many of the Chinese criticisms of the CPSU's line. The Malay, Burmese and Thai CPs had adopted a fully Maoist outlook by the mid-60s but a number of other parties such as the North Koreans, Vietnamese and the Japanese refused to endorse the increasingly extreme Chinese positions and steered an independent path, urging costumes for our women, what is the use of discarding them and putting on dresses which are unbecoming of them? There is no need to do this. I suggested to Comrade Pak Jon Ae to see that our women dress in Korean costumes as far as possible."

"The Korean leaders condemn the Chinese leaders for their great cultural revolution want to conduct a year Kim Il Sung in November of this the Soviet Ambassador in a conversation with Revolution" in China. so-called 'Cultural the conduct of the Zhivkov and Gustav Husak following events leadership is closely associated with the Korean slogans. the Cultural Revolution. it was still in the throes of time - China excepted, as of socialist countries of leaders of other ruling parties the standard rhetoric of little to set them apart from 1970s, there appears very Reading the speeches of Kim Il Sung during the changed reality into Chinese do not take Korean comrades the statements of the According to 'left opportunism, dogmatism, and power chauvinism, not an example of left opportunism on the part of the CPC and its leaders?"<sup>23</sup>

Reading the speeches of Kim Il Sung during the 1970s, there appears very little to set them apart from the standard rhetoric of leaders of other ruling parties of socialist countries of time - China excepted, as it was still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution. Welcoming East European leaders such as Todor Zhivkov and Gustav Husak associated with the conduct of the so-called 'Cultural Revolution' in China. In a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador in November of this year Kim Il Sung said, "The Chinese want to conduct a cultural revolution forms. take on quite different the *juche* idea began to from the mid-1970s onward the second part of this article. However, as we will see in Leninism"<sup>24</sup>

Notes and References

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4 Quoted by T Branigan and J McCurry, *North Korea critics rebuke media for saying Kim Jong un ordered executions*, in *The Guardian*, 23 September 2013; accessed at [www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/23/north-korea-rep-ille-media-kim-jong-un](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/23/north-korea-rep-ille-media-kim-jong-un).

5 (B)CE = (Before) the Common Era.

6 For a typical South Korean version see [http://asianglish.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/AK/AK\\_EN\\_1\\_4\\_2](http://asianglish.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/AK/AK_EN_1_4_2).

7 Korean Central News Agency, November 1993; quoted in B Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*; p 24.

8 *Op cit*, p 25.

9 A limited use of Chinese characters has continued in South Korea but was more or less eliminated by the North Koreans in 1949.

10 The process is described in M E Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, University of Washington, Seattle, 2009.

11 Quoted in *Ibid*, p 88.

12 For background see Hyun Ok Park, *Two Dreams in One Bed: Empire, Social Life, and the Origins of the North Korean Revolution in Manchuria*, Duke UP, Durham NC, 2005.

13 For the standard definition at the time see A I Sobolev, *People's Democracy, a New Form of Political Organization of Society*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954, p 5: "The first stage is that of the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal revolution, in the course of which the People's Democracy arises as the organ of revolutionary power, representing in its class content something akin to the dictatorship of the working class and peasantry, with the working class in the leading role."

14 The best short introduction is B Cummings, *The Korean War: A History*, Modern Library, New York, 2010.

15 The first DPRK constitution included Article 31 recognising the right of national minorities to self-determination, but Korea had none. The clause had presumably been copied from the first DPRK constitution included in *Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> International Symposium "Socialist Solidarity to Quasi-alliance, 2007*, in 17 See A Lankov, *Russia and North Korea: From Charles K. Armstrong/3460*.

16 C Armstrong, *The Destruction and Reconstruction of North Korea, 1950-1960*, in *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 8, Issue 51, No 2, 20 December 2010; accessed at [www.japanfocus.org/-charles\\_k\\_armstrong/3460](http://www.japanfocus.org/-charles_k_armstrong/3460).

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21 Writing from a firmly anti-communist perspective, the Russian-born historian Andrei Lankov has translated numerous archival documents from this period in *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*, C Hurst & Co, London, 2002 and *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of Destalinization, 1956*, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 2005.

22 Kim Il Sung, *On eliminating dogmatism and formalism and establishing *juche* in ideological work*, December 1955; accessed at [www.marxists.org/archive/kim-il-sung/1955/12/28.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/kim-il-sung/1955/12/28.htm).

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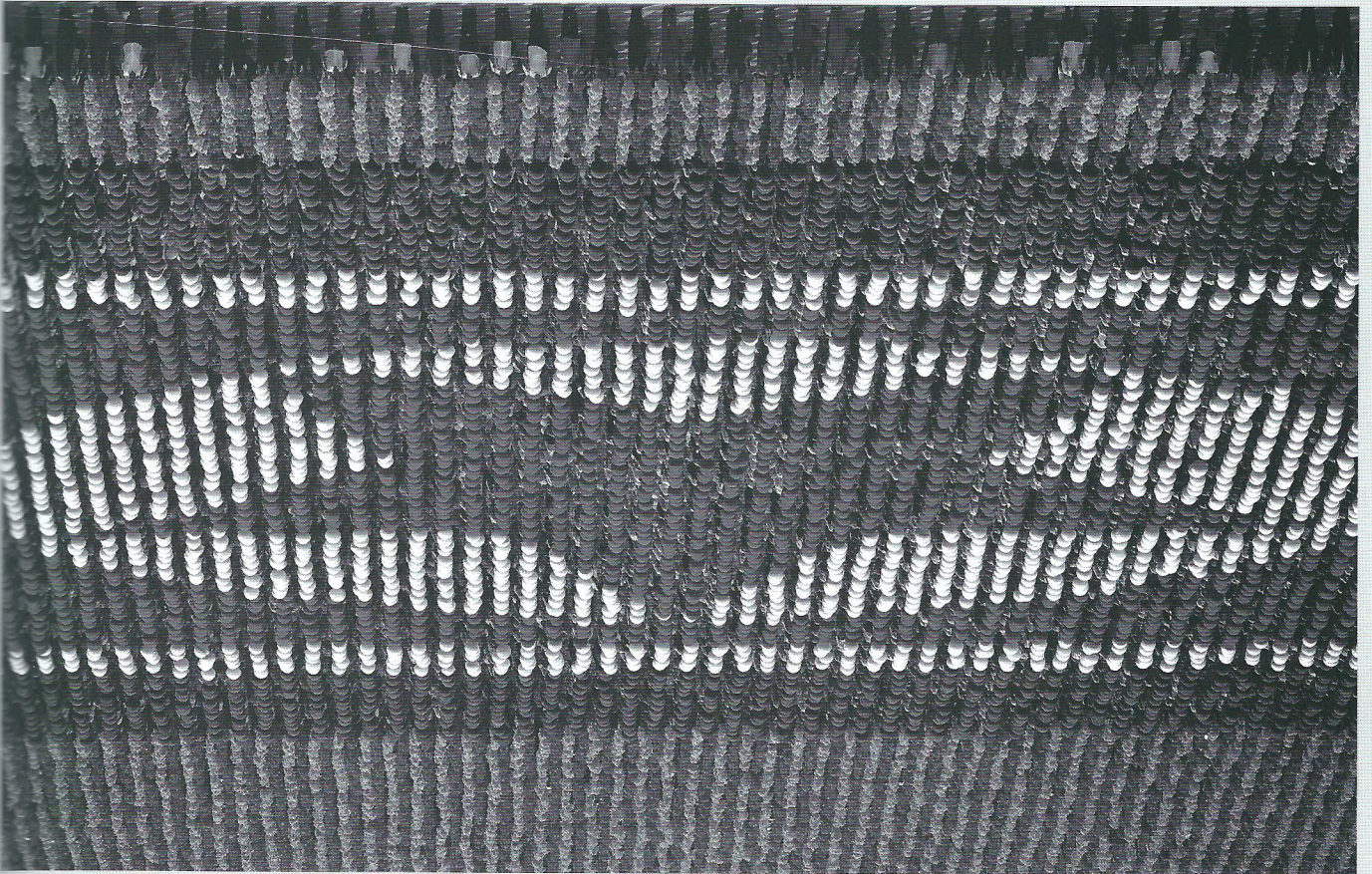


# The Korean Ideology: Marxism and Juche

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PART 2: "MARX'S THEORIES AND  
FORMULAS ... CANNOT ACCORD  
WITH THE PRESENT REALITY"



*I looked at the emergence of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea and its roots in Korea's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles. This second part looks in more detail at how North Korea's official ideology has developed in the past four decades and has increasingly diverged from Marxism.*

## 1. From Marxism to Kimilsungism

In the first two decades after *juche* was launched in 1955 by Kim Il Sung, the theory was presented as essentially a Korean adaptation of Marxism to specific national conditions. However, a dramatic shift in Korean ideology appears to coincide with the gradual rise to public prominence of Kim Il Sung's heir Kim Jong Il. In a speech, apparently given in 1976 by Kim Jong Il, entitled *On Correctly Understanding the Originality of Kimilsungism*, a sharp demarcation was drawn between this theory and

Kim said: "Both in content and in composition, Kimilsungism is an original idea that cannot be explained within the framework of Marxism-Leninism."<sup>2</sup> In this (and in a series of later works attributed to Kim Jong Il), a number of themes were developed to explain this. First, there was the claim that Marxism-Leninism was outdated and belonged to a previous epoch:

"The revolutionary theory of Kimilsungism is a revolutionary theory which has provided



his view on *juche*. The following three excerpts are from *On Establishing the Juche Outlook in the Revolution*:

“Victory in the revolution depends, in the long run, on how the subject of the revolution, the integral whole of the leader, the party and the masses, is strengthened and how its role is enhanced. In establishing the revolutionary outlook, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the object of the revolution, but it is most important to have the correct understanding that the leader is the centre of the life of the socio-political community. ...

If one is to establish the *juche* outlook on the revolution, one must, above all else, establish the revolutionary outlook on the leader. In doing this, it is important to have the correct understanding that the leader is the centre of the life of the socio-political community. There is no doubt that the centre of life is important for the existence and activities of the organism. Unless the masses are united, centring on the leader, they cannot acquire vitality as an independent socio-political community. We must understand and believe that the leader is the centre of the life of the socio-political community and that it is only when we are linked to the leader organisationally, ideologically and as comrades that we can acquire immortal socio-political integrity.”

Kim Jong Il’s descriptions bear little similarity to classical Leninist conceptions of collective leadership, which emphasised discussion and discipline within the party, and a vanguard party that would link up with the non-party masses (“tribune of the oppressed”).

## 2. Tradition and Revolution

The uniqueness of Kim’s argument is that a “leader” who stands outside the masses apart from the party and masses, there is and the party and yet at the same time takes centre stage. If not from Marxism, where does this concept come from?

beyond the limits of prediction and supposition.”

The final factor demonstrating the superiority of the *juche* idea given by Kim Jong Il was that Kim Il Sung had developed an entirely new theory of leadership:

“Furthermore, Kimilsungism raised the new question of the method of leadership in the revolutionary theory of the working class and elucidated it in a comprehensive way. The question of the leadership method holds an independent place, both theoretically and practically, in the revolutionary struggle of the working class. The revolutionary cause of the working class, the cause of socialism and communism, is a deep-going, complicated struggle to transform the world thoroughly and a great struggle in which the broad masses participate. Therefore, this revolutionary cause would be victoriously achieved only when a correct leadership method, together with a correct guiding idea and theory, is applied. The question of the leadership method assumes still greater importance when the working-class party takes over power, administers a new society and directs the building of socialism and communism. But in the revolutionary theory of the working class this question was never systematised as an independent theory before. Kimilsungism’s important service is that it provided a new elucidation of the theory on the leadership method and systematised it as an independent element.”

The claim that no Marxist before Kim Il Sung had bothered to develop a method of revolutionary leadership seems spurious, since issues of leadership had been central to Lenin’s development of Marxism in particular, and Kim Il Sung was certainly well aware of the writings of both Stalin and Mao.

The insistence on the role of leadership becomes clearer if we see it as a rationalisation, or theorisation, of the personality cult itself. Already powerfully entrenched by the late 1960s, Kim’s personality cult had taken on unimaginable proportions by the 1980s. In 1987, Kim Jong Il again explained

Second, there was a rejection of dialectical materialism:

“The materialistic dialectic of Marxism presented the correlation and between being and thinking as the fundamental question of philosophy and proved the primacy of matter, the primacy of being. On this basis it clarified the laws of motion of the objective world. The material nature of the world and its universal laws of motion having been clarified, the *juche* idea presented the position and role of man in the world as the fundamental question of philosophy and proved that man is the master of everything and decides everything. It explained on this basis the law that governs the domination, transformation and development of the world by man. The *juche* idea pursues man in the place of master who dominates the world, instead of simply presenting him as a part of it. This philosophical principle of the *juche* idea cannot be explained within the framework of materialistic dialectic.”

This represents a fairly comprehensive assault on a basic principle of scientific socialism. The *juche* idea that “man is the master of everything” is counterposed to the Marxist approach that “men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please”, in other words that the subjective factor is always conditioned by objective factors independent of human will or intention. This second interpretation of the *juche* idea shows a marked shift toward philosophical idealism and its political counterpart, voluntarism. Third, Kim Jong Il proposed the idea that Marxism-Leninism was relevant only for the period before the triumph of the revolution but not afterward:

“The problem of building socialism and communism has been clarified in a new way by Kimilsungism. True, the founders of Marxism-Leninism, too, expounded some views about socialist and communist society, but their views did not go far



These aspects of the *juche* idea seem to draw heavily from Korean Buddhist tradition, *Seon*, which is best known in the West through the related Japanese term *Zen*. This outlook is deeply rooted in Korean culture. The emphasis on the leader in *juche* has its counterpart in the *Seon* tradition of masters, who share their enlightenment by instructing others. Just as *Seon* emphasises the 'oneness of the universe', *juche* seeks to realise the monolithic unity of the Korean nation with "socio-political integrity".

Other commentators have also noted the strong element of Confucianism within North Korean discourse. The Korean American scholar Han Park offered the following insight:

"Confucianism led to the development of a particular social order in Korea. In addition, it is clear that the Confucian familial and social structure contributed to the development of a distinct political culture and to the observable configuration of values, symbols, orientations, and behavioural patterns. Although the North Korean regime made efforts to eliminate Confucian beliefs and behaviour from North Korean society and political culture, it can be argued that strong vestiges of Confucianism exist in the current North Korean political and social structure. In short, several salient and characteristic elements of Korean Confucianism have clearly reinforced the formation and maturation of the political ideology of *juche*. Elements such as a family-centred outlook, the human (rather than matter) as the centre of the universe, and the notion of life after death have all exerted profound influence on the philosophical structure of *juche* ideology."<sup>6</sup>

The concept of filial piety, that is devotion and obedience to one's parents, is considered to be an essential Korean trait. One South Korean offered this definition:

"Filial piety, which is called 'hyodo' in Korean, is defined as supporting and serving one's parents, and is a natural duty of a person. From ages ago, morality in oriental society was derived from the 'hyojae' of Confucianism. 'Hyojae' means

honouring one's parents and intensifying one's brotherly love toward one's siblings, and represents peace and harmony within the family."<sup>7</sup>

North Korean media often refer to Kim Il Sung as the 'fatherly leader'. In one Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) editorial marking Kim's birthday in 2013, it was suggested that even the most mundane domestic detail was a matter for his benevolence:

"People in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK] call him 'our fatherly leader'. The call is an expression of their deep reverence for him of their deep reverence for him.... His care for the people's living covered all from clothes and footwear to daily necessities. He even settled family problems on his field guidance tours. Therefore, he always remains in the hearts of the DPRK people as their real father."

If Kim Il Sung can be personified as the father, Kim Jong Il ensured the party took on a maternal role. In another KCNA editorial a few weeks later we read:

"General secretary Kim Jong Il in his lifetime had worked hard to develop the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) into a motherly party faithfully serving the people.... He always said that the WPK should bear responsibility for the popular masses' destiny and take good care of it as a mother does for her child."<sup>9</sup>

The North Korean cult of the Kim family goes beyond simply nepotism in political leadership: it is aimed at reinforcing a wider message, 'blood is thicker than water', the whole nation is one family, led and cared for by each succeeding Kim. The grandfather-father-son succession fits seamlessly into this framework. For this reason, superficial comparisons with the USSR during the Stalin era or China during the Cultural Revolution have their limits. Undoubtedly the hefty influence of Stalin, and perhaps more directly Mao's personality cult shaped Kim Il Sung's political formation. Yet, despite obvious similarities, the Kim *family* cults go far beyond those two examples of *personality* cult.

If the family-centred notion

### 3. Songun Politics

The Korean peninsula is one of the most heavily militarised regions in the world. North Korea spends approximately 16% of its entire gross domestic product on defence but is still massively outspent by the South Korean budget of around US\$25bn a year. One million North Korean military personnel face 600,000 well-armed South Koreans and around 35,000 US forces stationed in Korea.

In this context, the development of the *songun* (military-first) policy by Kim Jong Il in the late 1990s is yet again a rationalisation of necessity. The DPRK faces military threats from the US and an increasingly militarised Japan. However, it was also developed at a time when the DPRK's economy was in freefall, with the state's industrial sector grinding to a halt and the public distribution system of food rationing breaking down. While army units had regularly been employed in construction projects and seasonal agricultural work in the past, the military began to play an even more significant role during the economic crisis, dubbed 'The Arduous March'.

As one Korean-American academic puts it:

"To North Koreans, the military is not an abstract authority but a practical performer. It responds directly and effectively to people's needs and wants. It delivers in a way that no others can: it delivers services and goods to the people and provides security. When I asked a farmer about his understanding of the *songun* doctrine, he offered that 'it is the military that makes farming possible as the soldiers come into the village to perform the complete range of farming tasks from tilling the soil to seeding, irrigating, and harvesting.' He continued, 'The military not only protects the people's lives from foreign hostility, but it also delivers food and services.'"<sup>10</sup>

In short, the army took on tasks that other arms of the state were no longer able to take on. The North Korean political system, established by a former guerrilla leader whose close comrades-in-arms filled the leading posts of party and state



In apparent contradiction of *songun's* military-first principle, Kim Jong Un has said that "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is, in essence, the people-first doctrine."<sup>16</sup> His speeches have stressed the need to raise people's living standards and to upgrade civilian technology, especially in IT and computer-controlled manufacturing, alongside maintaining the DPRK's nuclear weapons programme as a guarantee of independence. This twin-track approach, known in Korean as *byungjin*, appears to be a hallmark of Kim Jong Un's line.<sup>17</sup> A WPK central committee report from 2013 outlined its key features [emphasis added – KC]:

"The plenary meeting set forth a new strategic line on carrying out economic construction and building nuclear armed forces simultaneously under the prevailing situation and to meet the legitimate requirement of the developing revolution. This line is a brilliant succession and development onto a new higher stage of the original line of simultaneously developing economy and national defence that was set forth and had been fully embodied by the great Generalissimo.

It was stressed at the meeting that the party's new line is not a temporary countermeasure for coping with the rapidly changing situation but a strategic line to be always held fast to, in the supreme interests of the Korean revolution."<sup>18</sup>

A number of insightful commentators believe that there are definite signs of a modest economic recovery, a more varied consumer market, state firms branching

class had transformed its character due to the domination of mental over manual labour and the scientific and technological revolution. As a result:

"Marx's theories and formulas, which had been set forth one and a half centuries before, cannot accord with the present reality. The times have advanced further, witnessing a great change in social atmosphere, class relations and the status of the working class. With the development of capitalism, especially with the rapid development of science and technology and the arrival of the IT age, the living basis of the working class has been changed and work is being done on a more technological and intellectual basis. The ranks of the working class have been intellectualised and the working masses engaged in technical, intellectual and mental labour are quickly outnumbering manual workers."<sup>13</sup>

While the amended constitution adopted in the last years of Kim Jong Il's leadership continued to proclaim the DPRK's socialist character, previous references to "communism" and "communist" in articles 29, 40 and 43 were deleted.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. From *Songun* to *Byungjin*

Since Kim Jong Un took power after his father's death, there have been some significant adjustments. Judging by the published materials so far, the youngest Kim no longer feels much need to situate Marxism. Instead he has proclaimed a new stage in the *juche* idea. "The guiding ideology of the WPK is the great Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism."<sup>15</sup>

for decades, has always been highly integrated with its military. Article 100 of the DPRK constitution states that the role of "supreme leader" is derived from the chairmanship of the National Defence Commission.

Since the North Korean military plays such a widespread social and economic role Han Han Park notes that:

"*Songun* is much more than a political slogan, and it is more than the simple practice that the military holds all the power and the civilian sector is thus undermined and neglected. It is, in a single phrase, a pervasive philosophical ideology that undergirds [the] bolsters – KC] the very structure and function of North Korean society. Understanding that fact renders the society intelligible."<sup>11</sup>

With *songun*, Kim Jong Il took the rejection of Marxism even further by denying the leading role of the working class:

"On the basis of its deep analysis of the development of the times and the changed social and class relations, our Party put forward, for the first time in the history of the revolutionary movement, the idea of precedence of the army over the working class, giving prominence to the People's Army as the core unit and main force of the revolution."<sup>12</sup>

Using arguments that will be familiar to anyone who has followed the debates on class within British and European Marxism for over three decades, Kim now proposed that the changing composition of the working





out into private sector operations and, despite the temporary closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in early 2013, willingness to engage in joint ventures and expand special economic zones. Most of these projects were already in operation or well under way before Kim Jong Un took power.

"In many regards, Kim Jong Un is just harvesting what had been sown years ago, be it long-term macroeconomic trends like marketisation, monetisation and intensified foreign trade with China, or specific construction and renovation projects."<sup>19</sup>

It is still too early to predict if these changes are merely reluctant adaptations or represent the beginnings of more radical reforms.

By contrast, in China, Deng Xiaoping's reforms launched in 1978 were based on a whole number of national and international factors that do not apply to the DPRK, such as a large reserve of rural labour, a huge domestic market and initially favourable international relations. Deng was also able to reorient China ideologically by offering a critical assessment of Mao Zedong ("70% good 30% bad") that allowed him quickly to jettison the most dogmatic elements of Mao's philosophy while embracing the pragmatic aspects. One of Mao's favourite maxims, "Seek truth from facts", became a key slogan of Dengs. It is almost inconceivable to imagine Kim Jong Un being able to criticise his father's or grandfather's ideas in the same way.

**5. *Juche* in Comparative Perspective: Anti-Imperialism and Ethno-Socialism**

While *juche* has been built explicitly with Korean elements, there are some parallels with the various forms of African socialism, or the Arab socialism associated with Nasserist and Ba'athist movements in the post-colonial period. These radical ideological currents emerged in regions where imperialism had artificially drawn boundaries that bore little relation to historic or ethnic communities, just as the single nation of Korea has been divided.

There are several common themes shared by these ethno-socialisms:<sup>20</sup>

a) The preference for independence even at the expense of material wealth. "We prefer poverty in liberty to riches in slavery," as the Guinean leader

Ahmed Sékou Touré once said.<sup>21</sup>

b) The use of tactical non-alignment. For the Arab and African socialists this meant tilting toward the socialist camp without joining it, while for the Koreans it often meant a balancing act between the USSR and China. The tremendous emphasis placed on perceived traditional values and culture as the source of the nation's strength. The Senegalese leader Leopold Senghor remarked that "Culture is the very texture of society,"<sup>22</sup> and built his theory of negritude around this idea, while Kwame Nkrumah talked of a specific "African personality."<sup>23</sup>

d) Placing the priority on ideology and mental outlook. Julius Nyerere said, for example:

"Socialism – like Democracy – is an attitude of mind. In a socialist mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern, which is needed to ensure that the people care for each other's welfare."<sup>24</sup>

e) Giving priority to national unity over class struggle. The original programme of the Ba'athist movement put it this way:

"The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party is nationalist for it believes that national unity is an eternal and living truth.... [T]he national idea to which the party adheres is the desire of the Arab people for freedom, unification and the realisation of its historic character.... The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party is socialist for it believes that socialism is a necessity which derives from Arab nationalism."<sup>25</sup>

Yet, despite these common elements, *juche* still stands out in its attempt to be an all-embracing philosophy, encompassing all aspects of social behaviour and personal conduct.

**6. Revival or Survival?**

Given the catastrophic scale of North Korea's economic crisis in the 1990s, its imminent collapse was widely predicted. Yet, not only has the DPRK survived but, most remarkable of all, political power has now been wielded by three generations of the Kim family since 1945. Beneath this apparent continuity as I have shown, the DPRK and WPK

have steadily discarded their Marxist origins and instead have adopted 'Korean socialism' or 'socialism of our own style', based on the *juche* idea.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the DPRK's origins as a Soviet-supported people's democracy, the Korean leadership focused on creating an unchallengeable national legitimacy and shaped its ideology to that end. It did so by underpinning its revolutionary aspects with conservative approaches to culture and tradition. The most outstanding example of this is that, while uprooting traditional Korean ancestral class heritage, Kim Il Sung established a new hierarchy with a focus on revolutionary lineage and on honour derived from patriotic resistance. This maintained the family at the centre of North Korean society while all around it changed.

The recent execution of Jang Song Thae, who was married to Kim Jong Un's paternal aunt, provided a vivid, if bizarre, example of this. Jang was not a blood relative of Kim and the communist regime announcing his execution clearly separates him from those descended from the Kim family, referred to in the text as "the lineage of Paektu" – a mountain sacred to early Koreans and a location assiduously and often inaccurately linked to the Kim family, in particular as Kim Jong Il's fabled birthplace.<sup>26</sup>

The metamorphoses of *juche* ideology have allowed the North Korean leadership first to evade de-Stalinisation and then to survive the collapse of its Soviet ally, even if the costs have been unbearably high in human terms. The next conundrum is how far the latest incarnations of *juche* ideology can be taken. If the bureaucratic rigidity of the leaderships in the European socialist countries and their dogmatic presentation of Marxism antagonised an increasingly educated and cultured population to the point of mass unrest, how long will North Koreans accept the outrageous myths of the family cult on which *juche* is based?

It is likely that Kim Jong Un himself is aware of this:

"It is the world trend to put the economy on a knowledge basis, and we are faced with the epochal task of transforming our national economy into one that develops by dint of knowledge."<sup>27</sup>

But knowledge is not the same as ideology. While predictions of the DPRK's imminent collapse are less



difficult due to the lack of reliable data and information from inside the country. Without such evidence, further questions about the precise character of the DPRK that I think need to be explored cannot be adequately answered.

For the moment, the characterisation of the DPRK as a socialist state, as *Britain's Road to Socialism* does, seems broadly adequate economically to describe the still largely state-owned and state-controlled industry and co-operative agricultural systems, but on the political level how does any concept of socialist democracy fit with what is now a fully-fledged dynasty?

Since North Korea remains a target of the US military and its regional allies, the British left must continue to uphold the demand that the future of the Korean peninsula should be determined peacefully by the Korean people themselves and not outsiders. However, as communists we should not confuse that elementary principle of solidarity with any kind of endorsement of political and ideological lines that run counter to the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the original potential and promise of the Korean revolution itself.

According to their own conditions, as well as the extent and pace of interaction with the global market. Jang's execution certainly suggests both that the monolithic character of the DPRK leadership fractured at the highest levels, while several of the charges against him related to his relations with a foreign country, almost certainly a veiled reference to China.

Given the abandonment of Marxism and the entrenchment of hereditary succession in the DPRK, it is impossible to predict the country's future trajectory with any certainty. In the past, while there was an obvious dichotomy between the political structures centred on the personality cult and the collective socialist organisation of the economy, the country was generally stable and made genuine economic progress at least into the 1970s. Today its stability is less assured and the country lags far behind its southern counterpart and now its northern neighbour too.

These two articles have focused on ideological questions regarding the DPRK. Evaluating the DPRK's current social and economic status is more complex than the DPRK's current status is more

plausible than they were 20 years ago, the contradiction between a mystical ideology based on fanatical devotion to an all-knowing supreme leader and the need for a scientifically grounded approach to socio-economic development can only sharpen. The DPRK's economic recovery can only be sustained with increased overseas trade and outside investment, which has also been recognised by the Kim Jong Un leadership:

"The country's economy should be shifted into knowledge-based economy and the foreign trade be made multilateral and diversified and investment be widely introduced."<sup>18</sup>

However, it is not clear precisely how this can be accomplished without substantially opening up the country to foreign influences. China, Vietnam and to a lesser extent Cuba have all undergone this process and found their own methods of handling the challenges and opportunities with varying degrees of success. In all three cases, the ruling parties have maintained their core attachment to Marxism while reassessing the role of markets and planning.

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