

Myers, Brian R.:

NORTH KOREA'S JUCHE MYTH.

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North Korea is 'one of the last bastions of communism', where the 'state ideology is Juche', which is 'a personal invention of Kim Il-sung, and its essence is the absolute political, economic and military sovereignty of the country.' These characteristics of North Korea may be encountered by readers in many Czech as well as foreign news websites and in more or less specialized publications. They are accepted and reproduced while few think over their truthfulness and try to verify whether they correspond to reality.

Perhaps the most well-known opponent of a non-critical approach to the 'truth' about North Korea is an American journalist and associate professor of international studies at South Korea's Dongseo University in Busan, Brian R. Myers. He and his academic action, inter alia, tackle myths which were created by the scientific and journalistic work around the regime in Pyongyang over decades. So he does even in his latest publication *North Korea's Juche Myth*, which was published by Sthele Press in October 2015.

What is its main message? Myers claims that Juche, which is by many academicians considered to be the leading ideology driving North Korean politics in both domestic and international issues, never functioned as a practical state ideology, nor was that its purpose. In contrast to the widespread perception, Myers claims that Juche was never intended to be put into practice, or even studied – it existed (and partly still exists) to legitimize its declared creator Kim Il-sung as a great thinker and to

provide cover for the true North Korean state ideology, which is a radical racial nationalism.

In his book, Myers chronologically disproves one 'Juche myth' after another, uncovers the origins of the concept, reveals the true history of the presumptive state ideology and in he examines detail the content of related works where Juche is defined. Firstly, the author shows that the label 'Juche' is not untranslatable and purely North Korean, as many academics claim. It signifies a *subject*, an active, thinking agent, which is the opposite of the passive object. By calling for 'the rejection of dogmatism and formalism and implementation of the subject (Juche) in the ideological work', Kim Il-sung asked only for what, when he firstly used this term in the mid-50s, was a common practice of all socialist countries – that is a subjective (meaning active) application of Marxism-Leninism to local conditions, exactly following instructions from Moscow. In his speech from 1955, therefore, the North Korean leader did not break up with the Soviet Union, as some scientists claim.

The aforementioned thesis about the introduction of the subject, however, was not originally coined by Kim Il-sung, but by the North Korean vice-prime minister who was partly his opponent in the struggle for power, Kim Chang-man. And that was one of the reasons why the creation of Juche ideology was not ascribed to Kim Il-sung in the official propaganda until 1970, when Kim Chang-man was no longer in an influential position. Two years later, the apparent state ideology was described by the North Korean leader to a Japanese journalist, but the humanistic premises declaring that 'man is the master of his fate', had been created by Hwang Jang-yop, a high-ranked party member, who later fled to South Korea. Thus even another myth about the origins of Juche falls.

Myers also shows that Juche was not a coherent set of principles from the beginning,

but developed according to regime's needs from the fifties to the eighties. Although premises can be found in it that can construct an independent ideology, which in the case of Juche is a very vague, tautological and repetitive one, in the author's words this ideology never worked in the North Korean practice. What was its purpose then? The purposes were mainly propagandist. Juche was to serve firstly to mask radical racial nationalism, even to the countries of the socialist bloc, who were supposed to believe in the communist orientation of Pyongyang, secondly, to increase the popularity of North Korea among the non-aligned countries, whose sympathy Kim wanted to use to ensure the legitimacy of his own regime over its southern neighbor. The ideology was not intended for the North Korean people. They were not supposed to study the works attributed to Kim Il-sung, but instead they were taught his biography, which became a binding and key text for them. Over the years, however, Juche also served another purpose, namely the codification of succession from father to son. That is because Kim Jong-il was introduced as an apprentice and successor of the ideas of Kim Il-sung in the eighties.

Although it is not the author's main area of concern, Myers' book can inform the reader a lot about North Korean propaganda, about the topics and style of the local propaganda apparatus. For any North Korea observer, it is important to realize that there are several levels of official propaganda, each of them targeting a different audience and communicating a different agenda. Myers distinguishes three propaganda tracks: the *Inner track*, focused on the North Korean people, who are indoctrinated with racial nationalism and the leaders' cults of personalities; the *Outer track*, domestic propaganda track, which is expected to be followed by the regime and also studied by foreigners (e.g. the activities of the media and published speeches of leaders) and which

communicates, among other things, the allegiance to Juche's ideas; and the *Export track*, propaganda aimed directly at foreigners that is not expected to reach the North Korean audience. This division clearly shows that Juche acts as a cover for the true ideology, which has its reserved space in the propaganda unavailable to foreigners. It is oriented to ordinary North Koreans, who are shaped by the ideas of purity and superiority of the Korean race from an early age, inter alia through compulsory education, awareness sessions, literature and studies of biographies of the leaders.

Myers' ideas, expressed in his book *North Korea's Juche Myth*, are not entirely new. He touched on the same topic in his earlier publications, particularly *The Cleanest Race*. One of Myers' theses formulated in *The Cleanest Race* provoked some controversies in 2010. According to the thesis, North Korea could not be further from the universally accepted image of a country based on the principles of communism, Confucianism, or even Juche ideology. Myers presents evidence substantiating the official regime's racial-nationalistic worldview, according to which 'Koreans are a pure and virtuous race to such extent it cannot survive in this world of evil without deliberate, parental guidance'. If we put this thesis in the context of the left – right political spectrum, it would be closer to the far-right wing political regimes rather than the socialistic regimes established on the international appeal 'Workers of the world, unite'.

Though *The Cleanest Race* (published in Czech in 2013) does break down some myths about North Korea, its principal merit lies in its description of what North Korea is really like – an extremely right wing, xenophobic and racial-national country. By contrast, *North Korea's Juche Myth* describes what North Korea is not like – a country upholding Juche ideology founded in humanistic principles calling for self-reliance and autonomy.

Myers' new book engages in the topic more profoundly. Myers puts across his arguments in a way that was not possible before, due to his previous book's limited number of pages. It may be beneficial to regard both books as two parts of one work as they complement each other. It is necessary to point out that *The Cleanest Race* is more fundamental and open to the wider audience, whereas *North Korea's Juche Myth* elaborates on certain aspects, mentioned in previous books, in detail. It also demands some knowledge of North Korean history and other contextual issues. Myers' latest book thus targets interested readers already familiar with the problem. It may not be translated into Czech for this very reason.

North Korea's Juche Myth is also intended for a reader who is not only interested in new and unorthodox views on North Korea but who also wants to give prevailing North Korean studies discourse a thought. It challenges readers' views on the way experts on North Korea work and about the science as a whole. Myers condemns the so-called academic groupthink, in other words, the collective thinking of academics who uncritically take each other's information and leave the verification process out. They reproduce many 'truths' widely circulating in the mainstream discourse and by doing so they help to codify them and make their disproving difficult. Even the major authorities in the field of North Korean studies are not safe from Myers' critique. According to him, their heuristic method and Korean language competences are often insufficient or flawed as are, consequently, their conclusions. In his opinion, this fact helped to create many myths and half-truths about Juche ideology.

Myers tries to avoid such mistakes. Linguistically well-equipped, he plunges into studying primary sources in their earliest editions – when possible. Such an approach should be essential for every social studies researcher. Its

importance is growing even more in the study of totalitarian regimes, which often incline towards rewriting history or even fabrication of entire historical events. These methods are typical for the North Korean regime and Myers is not the only one clarifying it. Former North Korean propagandist Jang Jin-sung describes the fabrication of Kim Il-sung's biography in his book *Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea*, where he also examines the role Juche ideology played in Kim Jong-il's consolidation of power.

Myers' way of research puts emphasis on mastering the local language as well as on the importance of working with primary sources in their original form with no censorship involved. These include other period sources, for example messages from eastern European embassies in Pyongyang. According to Myers, absence of such methods in many other research works produce knowledge that does not correspond to the real state of affairs, but which has however real practical impact. Politicians often base their views on incorrect materials and think of North Korea as a socialist, self-reliance and autonomy proclaiming country and not a right wing, racist, nationalistic country, as they should.

Myers' books may not change universally accepted views supported by many established authorities. However, we can understand his work as a reminder of what every researcher and scientist needs most – challenge of thought, questioning of mainstream ideas and the impulse to reflect on generally accepted truths and his or her own beliefs. Myers asks every open-minded reader a simple question: does the knowledge which prevailing discourse presents us really correspond to the observable reality.