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A Secret Society

by Hayley Reagin

(English 1102)

Shin Dong-hyuk is a North Korean refugee who travels the world telling his story. After twenty-three years of eating grass, bark, rats, bugs and whatever little amounts of food the guards would reward him with, Dong-hyuk barely escaped from one of North Korea's largest and most brutal reform prison camps where he was born. Watching his amazing story made me wonder about the internal clock work of North Korean society that has sent so many families like Shin's into prison in the first place. Kim Il Sung's idea of 'Juche' defines society, citizens' rights, and how it makes up the education of North Korean's people. Understanding this concept explains how North Korean life is influenced and shaped by the Juche ideology.

Civic duties are first and foremost to the citizens of North Korea. Jiyoung Song, a published author in *European Journal of East Asian Studies* and who has studied North Korea before, explained that Juche is the national ideology developed by the very first dictator of North Korea Kim Il Sung (88). The basic premise of Juche is the citizens of North Korea should have complete loyalty to their leader and his ideals. Kim Il Sung explained that "Human rights can never be realized without the defense of sovereignty" (Song 96). In other words, a North Korean citizen must show absolute loyalty to their leader and in return, basic rights and security are granted. The second dictator of North Korea Kim Jung Il, adopted the same set of ideals from his father. According to Kim Jong Il, his political ideals reflect that "Each individual must address his or her own social obligations *before* enjoying the respective rights and freedoms" (Song 109). The duties of the North Korean citizens are to first and foremost protect the nation and the leadership of the Kim Regime. Kim Jung Un, the current dictator of North Korea, uses the same ideology as his father and grandfather to keep a sovereign state.

Loyalty to the great leader and strong sovereignty to the state are taught to North Korean children at a very early age as the foundation of education is based upon the principles of Juche. In order to teach children the ideals of socialist society the fundamentals of education are shaped around the principles of Juche. Gay Reed, an educator herself who conducted intensive studies on North Korean education from actual North Korean textbooks, found that throughout their schooling North Korean children learn the principal of 'Juche', a North Korean ideology that is a diluted practice of Marxism and Leninism (4). For many years the North Korean dictator, Kim Il Sung, would review and edit textbooks that didn't idolize his status. He would remove information about the outside world and add mystified stories about himself as a heroic figure or as a fatherly figure which in turn, would make him seem powerful (Lee 350). Unfortunately since the death of Kim Il Sung and under Kim Jung Un's rule, not much has changed.

Even today in the 21st century, stories and lessons within the North Korean textbooks still demonize other cultures as an extreme form of nationalism. As the world becomes more connected through technology, North Korean children are being left in the dark. Dong-Bae Lee, a University of Queensland professor, conducted a study in South Korea with a board of professors from all over the world that studied how Non-North Koreans are portrayed in textbooks. He found that "...the text books emphasize the superiority of North Korean-style of socialism. The stories 'Swallows at our House' and...depict North Koreans living in paradise, whereas South Koreans live in hopeless conditions, oppressed by the Americans..." (Lee 366). There are a plethora of examples within his article that show how children's stories and other educational articles demonize other religions.

Americans are often depicted as violent or as Christian believers and the Japanese and South Koreans are shown in stories where they are being raped or discriminated against by U.S citizens (Lee 357; Song 102). At an early age children are being heavily influenced by learning about one ideology only, Juche. If that's the only lesson they learn growing up, then it's the only way of life that they'll ever know. And as Song explains in his article, "militarizing society prevents people from developing individual and liberal concepts of human rights" so growing up and Juche being the only principal taught in school really diminishes the chance of a revolution from happening (94). However, such an education is only for the few lucky children within North Korea that can afford to go to school or better, even have a school in their town.

Furthermore, National unity and military are the highest priorities in Kim Jung Un's socialist society and is the citizens' constitutional duty to protect them. Survival is the main theme in the North Korean Socialist Constitution. Gay Reed explains that "...all education in North Korea is designed to serve the socialist cause and all aspects of the revolution-ideological, technical and cultural-are dependent upon the North Korean 'cradle the grave' education system" (Reed 3). This means that at a young age, children's education is heavily swayed by the nationalistic belief of claiming allegiance to North Korea and Kim Jung Un. According the Kim Jung Il's political policy 'Military-first politics', the Korean People's Army comes first in state affairs and reserves all national resources for the army first rather than going to the public (Song 93). Propaganda is extensively used to promote loyalty to North Korea and pictures depicting Kim Jung Un and his father in "family like settings" are often seen everywhere. This serves the purpose of promoting the Kim regime and serve as a reminder of how the "Great Leaders" are the ones in charge. Breaking the law, like Dong-hyuk's family did, will get a citizen sent to one of the many prison camps in North Korea.

The idea of Juche is that citizens keep close to North Korean ideals and tradition, and if someone betrays the culture, then severe punishment is used to reprimand their behavior. Robert Park, a published author in World Affairs and who has conducted many studies on North Korea, reported that "Previous UN reports...have concentrated on nine human rights violations: violation of the right to food; torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment; arbitrary detention as a form of persecution;... discrimination particularly targeting women, children, people living with disabilities,..." and so on (Park 65). Being a war criminal, committing crimes such as treason against North Korea or attempting to escape to a different country is how a citizen can end up in a prison camp. When Kim Il Sung, the first dictator of North Korea, created these camps he put into motion the 3 Generation of Punishment Law which was designed to kill off families (Park 69). In other words, if a member of a North Korean family was to commit a crime against North Korea, not only himself but his entire family plus 2 generations would be sent to a prison camp as punishment. This ideology is based off the belief of Juche that if say the grandfather of a family was a revolutionary, then his son and grandson would be likely to commit the same crime (Cooper 3). Their children and grandchildren will only know life inside of a prison camp, that is if they even live that long. I believe this type of ruling is designed so families keep an eye on each other and police each other. It's a way to keep North Korean citizens from revolting against the regime.

Shin Dong-hyuk was lucky enough to be able to escape Camp 14, something that only a select few have ever successfully attempted. It was never defined what law Shin Dong-hyuk's family broke that sent Dong-hyuk's family to prison. He was interviewed by 60 Minutes in 2012 and was asked to tell his story. Anderson Cooper, the interviewer and a correspondent for CBS, asked Shin Dong-hyuk "Did you know America was real?" To which Dong-hyuk replied "Not at all" (CBS). Dong-hyuk was born and raised in Camp 14 by his mother, who was only allowed to get married as a reward from the guards. He was tortured, forced to watch his brother and mother get executed at the "execution site" at the age of 13, and was starved nearly to death from the lack of food. According to Park, "...an estimated quarter of a million political prisoners, one-third of them children, are

currently being forced to perform slave labor and are routinely subjected to systematic torture and rape,..." (Park 68). Rebelling against the laws that were created around the ideology of Juche will result in severe punishment and be an example to the rest of the country of what their fate would be if they acted in the same way.

Look on Google Earth; one will see Camp 14 as a large barren compound surrounded by barbed wire. Shin Don-hyuk climbed over the body of his dead friend who had been electrocuted by the barbed wire fence and escaped to China. Today he still lives in fear of being sent back home and executed. The breaking of laws (and therefore breaking the laws of Juche) sentence thousands in the nation each year to prison camps as punishment. Shin Don-hyuk's story of escape is rare but not unique. After extensive research of such a repressive culture, suddenly I find myself a little more grateful to live in the country that I do.

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