

## The Dilemma Of Juche

Simon Cox

If you're a coloured belt then you'll probably have seen some of the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree black belts at the front of class doing what looks like a nightmarishly demanding pattern. Perhaps you'll even have felt their feet whistle past your ear as they plough ever further and further backwards into the rest of the class, jumping and spinning and kicking. You may even have heard them talk about the pattern Juche – about how challenging it is, and perhaps even that it is the most controversial of the ITF patterns.

Juche is one of only a few patterns from General Choi, Hong-Hi's 24-pattern *Chang Hon* set that is not named after a famous individual from Korea's history. Chon-Ji is the most obvious, but there is also Hwa-Rang, named after the youth group, Sam-Il, named after a Korean independence movement, and Tong-Il, which refers to Korean unification. Juche is just another one of these.

Isn't it?

### What is Juche?

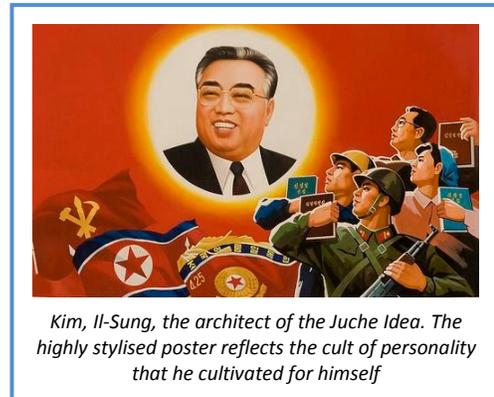
The Taekwon-Do encyclopaedia describes Juche as being “a philosophical idea that man is the master of everything and decides everything. In other words, the idea that man is the master of the world and his own destiny”<sup>(1)</sup> but as is sometimes the case with the people and the events behind the patterns, the reality of the issue is slightly more complicated.

Juche, or the Juche Idea, is the political philosophy, state ideology and official state religion of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), as developed by Kim, Il-Sung from the 1950s (though possibly from as early as 1930) through to the 1970s. It consists of a core set of philosophical principles and ideological doctrines by which North Korea – and by extension each one of its citizens – should conduct itself. These can be summarised succinctly as:

1. Political independence
2. Economic self-sustenance
3. Defensive self-reliance

The Juche Idea was developed largely in response to the gradual deterioration of relations between China and the USSR, the world's two largest communist states – and North Korea's closest allies – from the 1960s onwards, and in 1972 it replaced Marxism-Leninism as the official state ideology (although Kim, Il-Sung argued that it was merely a novel interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, in reality it draws on a combination of Marxist-Leninist, Maoist and Korean Confucianist influences).<sup>(2)</sup>

Juche was formalised within North Korea in 1982 with the publication of Kim, Jong-Il's document entitled *On The Juche Idea*, which enshrined Juche at the core of North Korea's state politics. The



*Kim, Il-Sung, the architect of the Juche Idea. The highly stylised poster reflects the cult of personality that he cultivated for himself*

following four tenets demonstrate the official application of the Juche Idea as the guiding framework of the North Korean political system:

1. The people must have independence in thought and politics, economic self-sufficiency, and self-reliance in defence
2. Policy must reflect the will and aspirations of the masses and employ them fully in revolution and construction
3. Methods of revolution and construction must be suitable to the situation of the country
4. The most important work of revolution and construction is moulding people ideologically as communists and mobilising them to constructive action<sup>(3)</sup>



The Tower Of The Juche Idea, Pyongyang, North Korea

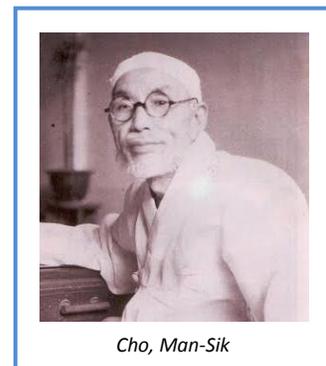
These tenets demonstrate that communism is explicitly one of the driving forces of Juche, and there can be little doubt that its purpose is, at least in part, the implementation of communism – specifically of Kim, Il-Sung’s and Kim, Jong-Il’s own personal interpretations of communism – at both national and international levels, and often to the detriment of the Korean people and the stability of the region.

You might find it surprising that such a transparently partisan political message is encoded within the ITF patterns, so at this point it is worth spending some time on the histories of General Choi, of the two Koreas, of Juche the pattern and on Ko-Dang, the pattern that Juche replaced.

Juche was not included in the *Chang Hon* pattern set when it was being developed and refined by General Choi from the start of his research in 1946 to its completion in 1983;<sup>(4)</sup> it was only in 1986 that Ko-Dang was replaced by Juche. So why was Ko-Dang removed and Juche introduced?

### Cho, Man-Sik and Ko-Dang

The pattern Ko-Dang is named after the Korean patriot Cho, Man-Sik, who was born in northern Korea in 1883. Between 1913 and 1945 he was vigorously involved in the Korean independence movement during the Japanese occupation of Korea (through which he met Ahn, Chang-Ho, after whom the pattern Do-San is named), though he dedicated himself to non-violent resistance – a philosophy that led to him being nicknamed “the Gandhi of Korea”.



Cho, Man-Sik

Following the end of the Second World War Cho continued to resist the post-war Soviet administration of the northern half of Korea, and he was eventually placed under house arrest by the authorities. Under these conditions he stood for election to the Korean vice-presidency in 1948, but he was unsuccessful, and he was later transferred to a prison in Pyongyang where he is believed to have been executed during the early days of the Korean War.<sup>(5)</sup>

Integrity, self-control, perseverance – he sounds like an ideal candidate to represent Taekwon-Do, and an admirable human being in general. Unfortunately, however, his position in Korean politics

represented a direct opposition to the communist revolutionary and future North Korean leader Kim, Il-Sung, and there is every possibility that Kim's influence on the Soviet administration led to Cho's execution.

### General Choi and late 20<sup>th</sup> century Korean politics

In 1945, following the Second World War, Korea was divided across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, with the North administered by the USSR and the South administered by the United States of America. In 1953, as a result of the Korean War, the Korean peninsula was formally divided along this line into two countries: the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea). In reality the Korean War was a "proxy war" between the USA and the USSR, one of several flashpoints that punctuated the protracted Cold War period, and the result was that whilst the South gradually moved towards western-style democracy (albeit with some periods of dictatorial rule along the way), the North remained steadfastly and resolutely communist. As such, the politics of the two Koreas were, and still are, diametrically opposed.



This ongoing friction (the 1953 armistice was never signed by South Korea, so even in 2011 the two states are still technically at war) meant that many Koreans found themselves excluded from one or other country. General Choi was one of these Koreans; after partition his birthplace, Hwa Dae, became part of North Korea, and its borders were closed to him.

I don't think it is controversial to claim that General Choi was a Korean patriot. As someone who watched as Korea was divided he wanted to see reunification of his country (a desire borne out by his inclusion of Tong-Il in the ITF pattern set), and in the 1970s he became actively involved in the reunification movement. His *Chang Hon* pattern set reflected his pride in Korea and its history, and it seems only natural that he should honour a patriot such as Cho, Man-Sik by naming one of the 24 patterns after him.

By the 1980s General Choi was spending ever more time in promoting Taekwon-Do to the world, and his exile from North Korea, and therefore his inability to introduce his martial art to the country of his birth, must have been extremely frustrating to him. In addition, by 1980 he was 62 years old, and it seems likely that at this point in his life he was thinking increasingly about his final years. He said that he wanted to die and be buried in the country of his birth.

In 1980 he eventually secured permission to tour North Korea with a demonstration team – a move that South Korea claimed was treasonous – and the South Korean authorities labelled him a communist. His relationship with the South had been deteriorating for some time, due to his criticism of the military regime, and this event soured it ultimately beyond repair.

General Choi was certainly not a communist – he fought the communist North during the Korean War, he served for many years in the South Korean army, he worked closely with the US military and in 1972 he moved his family and the ITF headquarters to Canada<sup>(6)</sup> – so what might have caused him to get rid of Ko-Dang and bring in Juche, with all of its communist connotations?

Juche for Ko-Dang – a hypothesis

For most of its history North Korea has been a belligerent, eremitic pariah state,<sup>(7)</sup> and I think that Kim, Il-Sung must have seen General Choi’s 1980 demonstration tour – a martial art of Korean origin, growing in popularity around the world – as a tremendous opportunity for propaganda. In addition, the close alignment with South Korea of the rival WTF organisation would have presented itself as a neat political simile.

**Juche**

*“Juche is a philosophical idea that man is the master of everything and decides everything. In other words, the idea that man is the master of the world and his own destiny. It is said that this idea was rooted in Baekdu Mountain which symbolizes the spirit of the Korean people. The diagram represents Baekdu mountain.”<sup>(1)</sup>*

As has been stated, however, it is likely that, as political opponents, Kim, Il-Sung felt strong antipathy towards Cho, Man-Sik, and he would have had no desire to have one of his enemies honoured in perpetuity.

With this in mind I would venture that Kim, Il-Sung presented General Choi with some kind of deal by which, in exchange for replacing the pattern Ko-Dang with a new pattern celebrating North Korea’s political ideology (and by extension Kim, Il-Sung’s cult of personality – Mount Baekdu is his supposed birthplace, and it has almost mythical significance in North Korea), ITF Taekwon-Do would be promoted as the country’s national sport and General Choi would have freedom to return. Given his patriotism, the breakdown of his relations with South Korea and the WTF’s dominance south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, I think that General Choi would have taken an opportunity of this kind rather than see his ITF Taekwon-Do – a martial art of Korean origin – absent from both Koreas.

**Ko-Dang**

*“Ko-Dang is the pseudonym of the patriot Cho, Man-Sik, who dedicated his life to the Korean Independence Movement and to the education of his people.”<sup>(1)</sup>*

This is conjecture, of course, but there are three things that I believe add weight to this hypothesis.

Firstly, General Choi said in a 1999 interview that “As new techniques were developed they needed to be represented in the patterns. The pattern Ko-Dang was replaced simply because it represented the latest Korean history – basically last in, first out” but Ko-Dang was replaced by Juche in 1986, and General Choi stated in the same interview that his research into Taekwon-Do ended in 1983 and that the patterns represent his development of Taekwon-Do from 1946 to this date.<sup>(4)</sup> If his research ended in 1983 then how could there be new techniques to include in 1986?

Secondly, although General Choi said that Ko-Dang was replaced because Cho, Man-Sik was the most recent aspect of Korean history to be incorporated into the patterns, in fact the Korean reunification aspired to by the 6<sup>th</sup> degree pattern Tong-Il could be argued to represent the latest Korean history and therefore to be “last in, first out”: Korea was first divided in 1945, following the end of the Second World War, and although Cho, Man-Sik lived until 1950, the contribution that he made to Korea’s independence movement began in 1913 – thereby far predating the country’s partition.

Thirdly it seems unlikely that the adoption of ITF Taekwon-Do by North Korea, the removal of a pattern named after one of the North Korean leader’s political enemies, and the insertion of a pattern honouring the North Korean political ideology should be mere happenstance. I must stress that there is

no evidence that this is anything other than coincidence, but for me it seems difficult to accept as simple chance.

### The dilemma of Juche

Whether you believe the official story behind its incorporation into ITF Taekwon-Do or not, I'm sure that you can see that there is an association – whether deliberate or coincidental – between Juche the pattern and Juche as it exists at the core of the North Korean political system.

Furthermore, practitioners of Taekwon-Do should remember that General Choi said that “each pattern of Taekwon-Do expresses the thoughts and the actions of [the person it was named after], so the students of Taekwon-Do must reflect the true intentions of those whose name each pattern bears” and that “each movement in a pattern must express the personality and spiritual character of the person it is named after”;<sup>(6)</sup> in other words, that in performing the pattern you are invoking what the historical figure or event honoured by the pattern represents.

With that in mind, I think that by now you will probably appreciate that this presents the practitioner of Taekwon-Do with something of a moral quandary when performing Juche.

You might argue that you don't really think about the noted monk Won-Hyo when you perform that pattern, or that Choong-Moo is just a word you shout when you do the pattern, or that Po-Eun is just a name and doesn't really mean anything to you. And you'd be right, up to a point; they were real people who lived real lives, but performing the patterns named after them doesn't mean that you actively believe that their lives were worthy or admirable. Similarly, performing Juche certainly doesn't mean that you consciously endorse the North Korean regime.

Let me give you an example, however, that might throw this thinking in a different light. Suspend Godwin's Law for a moment and imagine a pattern called Nazism, with a pattern diagram shaped like a swastika and a final move of parallel stance reverse knifehand front high inward strike (picture it and you'll see what I mean). Would you feel comfortable performing that pattern? Would you feel comfortable shouting “Nazism” after you'd performed it? Even if you ignored General Choi's instruction and didn't actively invoke the “personality and spiritual character” as you carried out the moves?

It's an extreme example, I know, but it serves to make the point that if there is no difference *in principle* between Juche and Nazism (or Fascism, or Capitalism, or even Post-colonial Anarchism) – and there isn't; whatever your opinion of them, they're all political ideologies – then there should be no difference in the way you feel about performing each of them.

I would like to emphasise that I'm not saying that performing Juche is morally dubious for the Taekwon-Do practitioner because the Juche Idea is necessarily a malignant ideology (although I suspect that most in the West would probably argue that it is) – all political ideologies are inherently subjective concepts



*Clockwise, from left: Yi, Soon-Sin (Choong-Moo), Won-Hyo and Chong, Mong-Chu (Po-Eun)*

and can be neither “right” nor “wrong” in an absolute sense – I’m saying that it is morally dubious for the Taekwon-Do practitioner simply because it represents a political ideology. Which political ideology it represents is of little or no relevance.

Political ideologies by their nature create divisions, and in the worst cases drive people to do awful things. So how can a martial art that declares a desire to “build a more peaceful world” as one of its tenets endorse (explicitly or otherwise) one ideology over another? How can a student who adheres to these tenets perform a pattern that appears to contravene one of them?

*That is the dilemma of Juche.*

## Conclusion

It is uncomfortably clear to me that Juche as a pattern represents the Juche Idea that underpins North Korean politics, and that, whatever the intent of the practitioner performing the pattern, its inclusion within the 24 ITF patterns represents an implicit endorsement of those politics.

I am convinced that General Choi replaced Ko-Dang with Juche for political reasons prompted by Kim, Il-Sung, but I also suspect that he did so for sentimental reasons, in order to anchor ITF Taekwon-Do to its country of origin, and I think that if this was indeed the case then it is easy for us to empathise with his motivations. The dilemma remains, however.

I enjoy reading about the people, events and concepts after which the ITF patterns are named, and I find many of them to be highly inspirational. In my opinion, however, no political ideology should form a part of a modern, international martial art, and for this reason Juche represents, for me, something of a stain on what was explicitly intended to be a moral art free from bias towards or against any gender, race, religion or creed.

Simon Cox  
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*Simon Cox is a marketer, a writer and a 2<sup>nd</sup> degree black belt. He trains at [Synergy TKD](#), part of the [Vision Taekwon-Do](#) organisation. You can find him at [www.simonjohncox.com](http://www.simonjohncox.com).*

Author’s note: parts of this essay are necessarily conjecture, and I hope that I have indicated those aspects clearly. All views expressed are my own and are not intended to represent or reflect the views of Synergy TKD, Vision Taekwon-Do, their instructors or their students.

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