

Soviet Influence on the North Korean Education System and Educational Practice

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All students of North Korean history are well aware of the important influence of Soviet patterns on institutions in the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (hereafter, the DPRK). In Particular, this influence is evident to a Russian who has spent the greater part of his life as a citizen of the Soviet Union and who is familiar with Soviet institutions. This knowledge of the Soviet Union is especially useful for understanding the historical roots of many North Korean traditions, historical roots that are sometimes overlooked by both Western and South Korean scholars.

The aim of this article is to describe the nature of the influence of Soviet patterns on the North Korean education systems, its institutions, as well as educational practices.

Historians in every country have their favorite topics which for some reasons are especially popular in a particular historical tradition. The history of education happens to be one such favorite topic among Korean scholars. Though until recently South Korean academics had not paid much attention to many aspects of North Korean history, the education is an obvious exception and one can find a plenty of Korean-language studies dedicated to the history and present position of education in the DPRK¹⁾

However, the task of this article is not to outline the history of North Korean education, but to investigate which features and traditions were borrowed by the North Koreans from the Soviet Union. South Korean scholars have also attempted to identify such features, but, not being familiar with Soviet educational practice, their studies have been limited to the impact of Soviet and Russian pedagogy on North Korea. In contrast, I focus on

the more practical aspects of this influence. Therefore, this article is mostly of expository and descriptive nature.

The North Korean educational system has been heavily influenced by Soviet (or, more generally, Russian) Patterns. This is hardly surprising; it is yet another example of the strength of Soviet influence on North Korea society in earlier periods of its history. However, what is worth noting is the uneven nature of this influence. In fields where North Korea had their own established traditions (namely, in elementary and, to a lesser degree, in secondary education), some indigenous traditions were retained, while in entirely new fields, like tertiary education or ideological indoctrination, Soviet influence was more profound.

In the later period after 1960 when the DPRK ceased to be a Soviet satellite state, North Korean authorities attempted to discard Soviet practice across the board. Aspects of the education system were reformed, and those patterns which were considered to be too distinctly Soviet were changed. However, these reforms were often superficial and North Korean educational practice is still very much of the Soviet mold.

This article is based mainly on South Korean materials related to the North Korean educational system, books and articles written by North Korean defectors, and my personal experiences living in both North Korea (as a foreign student) and the USSR. I also use some Western publications dealing with Soviet education in the 1950s and 1960s. I also would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Han Man Gil (Korean Educational Academy) and Dr. Caiger (Australian National University) whose cooperation was vital for my work. While this is only an initial study, I hope that this article may be useful for students of North Korean history and society.

I. Introduction of the Soviet Educational Practice to the DPRK

When the Soviet Army crossed the North Korean border in 1945, the Soviet generals knew little about the country they were going to rule. Nevertheless, the main outline of Soviet policy in Korea had been predetermined by the so-called "theory

of the people's democratic revolution" developed by Moscow ideologues by the end of World War II. According to this theory, the main task of the Soviet forces was to support the "progressive reforms" which were to transform the Soviet-occupied country into a socialist society. Western scholars usually refer to this process as "communization", but for the majority of Soviet servicemen in the 1940s (and the advisers who followed them) the picture was quite different.

The Soviet officials knew only one model socialist state and were convinced that Soviet-type institutions would emerge in every socialist or would-be socialist country. For the majority of Soviet officials, the speed at which Soviet patterns were adopted was the basic indicator of how rapidly a country could move toward genuine socialism, and North Korea was not an exception. This view was often shared by contemporary Korean leftists. The Soviet experts employed in almost every field did their best to introduce Soviet traditions to North Korean regiments, hospitals and schools; in fact, this was considered one of their primary tasks.

Soviet influence in North Korea was greatest between 1945 and 1955. Suffice it to say that, until the Korean War, many drafts of official speeches to be delivered by North Korean functionaries were examined by Soviet military offers, and later, after 1948, by Soviet diplomats.²⁾ Channels of this influence were numerous, since a great many of North Korean elite' members in one way or another come into contacts with the Soviet practice. Apart from Embassy staff, numerous Soviet Koreans sent to North Korea by Moscow between 1945 and 1950, played an important role in spreading Soviet influence. These were mostly former teachers or low- and middle-level officials, though their administrative and political offices very different to those they had previously held in the Soviet Union. Another channel of influence was the first-hand experience of Koreans who visited the Soviet Union as members of North Korean delegations or as students. After 1946, there was an ever-increasing number of Korean students in Soviet universities: in 1950, there were some six hundred Korean students at Soviet universities and institutes of higher learning. When they returned home, these students attempted to apply the methods and attitudes they had studied. Until the mid-

1950s, these attempts were generally welcomed by the North Korean authorities (though not always whole-heartedly).

The situation changed considerably from the mid-1950s, but to a lesser extent than sometimes thought. Though the North Korean authorities began to distance themselves from Moscow and to emphasize the "koreanness" of their policy (hence *chuch'e*), attempting to rid themselves of some very distinctly "Moscow" practices, they nevertheless continued to borrow ideas and principles they considered potentially useful (though they usually preferred not to disclose the foreign roots of some new methods and institutions). Since the Soviet Union was the country they knew best (with perhaps the exception of China), it is quite logical that the USSR remained a source of considerable (albeit concealed) influence until the early 1990s.

Soviet influence was and probably continues to be, more obvious in the field of education than in many other spheres of North Korean life. This is partly the result of the fact that the majority of the Soviet Koreans who arrived in Korea between 1945 and 1950 were teachers by training.

Later, some of them worked in other fields and institutions. For example, Nam Il, a professor of mathematics from Samarkand, served briefly as a deputy Minister of Education and later became Chief of General Staff, and more recently, Minister of Foreign Affairs. Initially, however, a great proportion of Soviet Koreans worked as educational advisers or officials of educational bodies.

Their role was significant in post-1945 Korea. The old Japanese-language education was unacceptable to the new authorities who did their best to transform the education system. The same was true of the remnants of missionary education which had survived Japanese persecution, but which were, in the minds of the new North Korean rulers, unsuitable because "religious" and "imperialist". However, because Korea had not had a modern education system prior to 1945, the Koreans had to borrow foreign (non-Japanese!) methods and traditions, and it is logical that the North Korean educational authorities sought to rely on Soviet experience while their South Korean counterparts were busy copying American patterns.

While the influence of Soviet pedagogical theory on North Korea is not a focus of this study (there are many South Korean

publications on this subject), the strength of this influence must be noted. Even after 1960 when official publications began to glorify new and allegedly indigenous pedagogical theories based on *chuch'e* ideas, it is apparent to the Russian reader that many new postulates were simply translations of Russian pedagogy textbooks. For example, in 1961, the 4th Congress of the Korean Workers Party set out "The Seven Main Goals of Education". The majority of these goals are only too familiar to the Russian observer. The main goal was "to educate a new, variously developed person" - an exact translation of the Russian phrase which by that time had become commonplace in Soviet textbooks and articles (rus. *vospitaniye vsestoronne razvitoj lichnosti*/kor. *tabangmyön-üro paljöntwen saeroun ingan-üi yuksöng*). Of the other "goals", another two were of Soviet origin while at least one other was strongly influenced by Soviet patterns.³⁾

However, the influence of Soviet methods on the various levels of North Korean education was rather unequal. At the tertiary level, it was considerable. The then structure of North Korean universities was almost identical to that of Soviet tertiary institutions, while middle and elementary schools retained more indigenous features (which were more often than not Japanese borrowings). This was probably a result of the general situation in North Korea before Liberation; tertiary education was then virtually non-existent, whereas primary and secondary education continued to function in spite of many impediments.

It also worth noticing that the basic ideological premises of Soviet and Japanese primary and secondary education are rather similar. Both countries favour a highly centralized school system controlled by a hierarchy of local education boards in turn led by an omnipotent Ministry of Education (which determines curricula, textbooks, rules of enrollment and all other educational principles). A high degree of curriculum standardization, an emphasis on a high volume of effective homework, as well as rigid discipline typify both the Japanese and Russian education systems. There is little wonder that the same system was established in the DPRK: Russian traditions found fertile soil.

II. Elementary and Secondary Education

From 1947 North Korea had a 5-3-3-4 education system: five years of elementary school (kor. *inmin hakkyo*), three years of middle school (kor. *chunghakkyo*), three years of secondary school (kor. *kodungchunghakkyo*), and four years of college or university. Although some South Korean scholars have claimed that this system was "a Soviet-type system",⁴⁾ this is not quite correct as the USSR, in 1946, had a 4-3-3-5 system (this changed to 3-5-2-5 in the late 1960s). However, in 1953 the period of elementary schooling in Korea was reduced from five to four years, almost surely influenced by the Soviet system. From 1958, middle schooling (seven years of study) became compulsory. In 1975, an additional compulsory year in kindergarten was added which effectively restored elementary education to five years.⁵⁾ between 1972 and 1975, secondary education - ten, and later, eleven years of study - was made compulsory (most likely, again, following the pattern of the introduction of compulsory secondary education in the USSR after 1969).⁶⁾

However, unlike in the Soviet Union where elementary schools are attached to secondary schools and independent elementary school may only be found in some remote villages, North Korean elementary schools are separate institutions.

In the Soviet Union, a chronic shortage of classroom space resulted in the emergence of a double shift system which had been widespread until the late 1960s when large-scale construction of school building greatly improved the situation. According to this system, some grades began their classes in the morning and studied until about 2 p.m. When these students went home, the classrooms were used again from about 3 p.m. until late evening. This system is also used in some North Koreans schools.⁷⁾

It worth mentioning that under Soviet influence the beginning of the North Korean academic year was changed to September 1 while South Korea retained the Japanese traditional date of March. However, the structure of the North Korean academic year is different from that in Russia. In Russia, the year is

divided in four terms, while in North Korea schools divide the year into two semesters.⁸⁾

An essential feature of North Korean education is predominance the single-sex school. However, it is not certain how widespread this separate education is. Some defectors categorically insist that there is no co-educational elementary schools in Korea.⁹⁾ However, another defector stated that he attended a co-educational elementary schools, though girls and boys studied in separate classes.¹⁰⁾ This situation may be likened to that in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and early 1950s. From 1943 to 1954, the Soviets experimented with single-sex education, but only in big cities, while in smaller - education continued towns and villages co-education continued because of the prohibitive cost of establishing separate schools.¹¹⁾ It is likely that this short-lived Soviet experiment, together with Confucian (and Confucian-influenced Japanese) traditions which insist on the strict separation of the sexes, may have influence the Korean situation. However, in 1954, the mandatory co-education introduced in Russia following the 1917 Revolution, was restored in the USSR.

The curriculum in North Korean schools was initially very similar to the Soviet model, and many textbooks were exact translations from the Russian. Until the early 1960s, the Soviet and Korean school curricula were almost identical.¹²⁾ Later the North Korean curriculum changed due to the intense ideologization of North Korean education generally; in the late 1960s and 1970s, such thrilling subjects as "The Revolutionary History of Kim Il Song" and "The Revolutionary Activity of Kim Jong Il" were added to the curriculum. The logical conclusion was reached in 1970 when "Rooms for Kim Il Songist Education" (kor. *Kim Il Söng kyoyangsil*) were established in all North Korean kindergartens!¹³⁾ In contrast, instruction in Soviet schools has never been so openly politicized, though social studies (such as history and geography) subjects were actively used as tools for indoctrination. At the same time, the bias towards natural sciences and mathematics which was typical in the USSR is even more evident in North Korea where the "humanities" have been transformed into ideological subjects.

North Korea also had (and this continued today) a system of militarized boarding schools which are open exclusively to the

descendants of perished revolutionaries and members of the ruling elite. These schools are called *hyökmyöng yuja hakwön* and currently have an enrollment of about 2,500. The most famous of these schools was established in Mangyondae near Pyongyang in October 1947. All such schools are run like military institutions. The very idea was modeled upon the Soviet Suvorov schools, established in 1943 (in the style of the pre-revolutionary cadet schools) for war-time orphans, with a seven year curriculum. However, the subsequent development of both institutions was rather different. In the USSR, after the number of war-time orphans decreased, the functions of elementary and middle school education were removed and the Suvorov schools were transformed into military secondary schools. They enrolled young men of fifteen or sixteen years of age who were going to become military officers and provided them with intensive general and military training. These schools were not considered very prestigious, though in the armed forces their graduates usually enjoyed considerable respect. In contrast, the North Korean *hakwöns* retained the tradition of earlier Soviet boarding schools. They provided elementary to secondary education (eleven years in total) and normally enrolled children (girls were also permitted!) at the age of six or seven years. Another noticeable difference is the high respect these schools command in North Korean society: they are considered to be first step towards a promising career in politics or administration.

The marking system in North Korean schools until very recently was an exact copy of the Soviet system. The highest grade was five, the lowest two. This system was replaced as recently as in 1990 by a new system, based on ten levels of grades. As in the USSR, in North Korean schools at the beginning of almost every lesson a teacher calls on a few pupils whose answers to specific questions are to be assessed. Most of the answers are oral, but written tests are not infrequent (especially in the sciences and mathematics).

III. Higher Education

After graduation from secondary school, a student may either seek employment or continue his/her education. The admissions

system in North Korea and the former USSR is very different. According to a tradition already well established prior to the 1917 Revolution, Soviet universities and tertiary education institutes held their own competitive entrance examinations and every secondary school graduate could apply for admission. In North Korea, those secondary school graduates seeking admission to university or institute must receive the approval of a local Board of Education which only recommends for admission a very small proportion of the total number of applicants. Unsuccessful applicants usually take up manual work, though they do have the right to reapply for recommendation.¹⁴⁾ From 1980 onwards, this permission has been given according to the results of a general test which is administered annually in secondary schools. The subjects examined are mathematics, physics, chemistry, foreign languages and, of course, the revolutionary history of the Great Leader. However, these examinations are only preliminary; they determine whether a graduate is eligible to attempt admission to a Pyongyang college or a regional institute. Approved graduates (comprising only a fraction of all aspirants, according to a defector - about 20%)¹⁵⁾ are sent to the appropriate institution where they are required to pass a new set of examinations.¹⁶⁾ This system is similar to that in South Korea or in China, but very different from the Soviet system.

Prior to 1980, the North Korea system was quite unlike that in the Soviet Union. Students were chosen by local Entrance Recommendation Committees (kor, *Taehak chuch'on wiwönhwoe*) based on their social position (kor. *sahoe söngbun*) and physical health rather than on their academic ability. This meant that even the best students had little, if any, chance at pursuing higher education if they happened to be the sons or daughters (or the grandsons or granddaughters) of defectors to the South, criminals, landlords or other such "reactionary elements". Sometimes even the remotest connection to such people was enough to thwart any such hope.¹⁷⁾ In the 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet authorities also adopted regulations (though much less severe than those in contemporary North Korea) making entry to universities more difficult for young men and women of a "reactionary background", but these measures were abolished before World-War II, and only the sons and daughters

of people classified as "enemies of the people" (i.e. of political convicts) were apt to be denied the right.¹⁸⁾ Those who happened to be scions of old Russian noble and aristocratic families, on the other hand, were openly proud of their heritage as early as the 1950s. It seems that the North Korean system of social selection was more influenced by Maoist experiments of the 1960s than by Soviet experience.

The next step in education for secondary school graduates may be one kind of junior college (kor. *kodüng chönmun hakkyo*; a loose translation of the Russian *tehnikum* which literally means "technical school"). In 1986 there were 576 such schools (henceforth referred to as "junior college").¹⁹⁾ Korean junior college were generally modeled on the analogous Soviet institution(rus. *tehnikum*), which appeared in 1920. Their educational objective is to train technicians and skilled workers as well as low-level managers. After graduation from these schools, students could take normal entrance examinations for universities and institutes, and if successful could enter first year, just like graduates of secondary schools (in North Korea students must first obtain permission to do so from a relevant body).

However, junior colleges are not held in high regard in the DPRK nor in the Soviet Union. The bulk of ambitious youngsters dream about a "real", i.e. higher, education. As mentioned above, North Korean higher education has much more in common with the Soviet system of higher education than elementary and secondary education have with their Soviet equivalents. A typical feature of the Soviet higher education system was a strict distinction between the two types of higher schools (the situation has undergone considerable change recently, hence the past tense). In the Soviet Union, universities aimed at preparing future academics, whereas institutes educated specialists in more practical professions, mostly engineers and school teachers. Each university had various departments specializing in everything from history to molecular biology to economics, while each institute specialized in a single field (such as communications or the textile industry). Traditionally, universities were few in number and were located in the biggest urban centers, and each large city could have only one university. The universities were also generally considered to be

far more prestigious than the institutes, though this rule was not without exception: the Moscow Institute of Foreign Relations is probably ranked the highest among the Soviet colleges, while a handful of some of the most prestigious institutes are considered to be of comparable quality to the good universities.

In North Korea one can see the same system of universities (rus. Universitet/kor. chonghap taehak) and institutes (rus. Institut/kor.taehak). For a long time there was only one university - Kim Il Song University in Pyongyang with approximately 12,000 students, but in the late 1980s two former institutes were upgraded to the status of "university" (most likely without much change in their curricula).²⁰⁾ The same development was apparent in the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s when some big (normally - pedagogic) regional institutes lobbied the Minister of Education with support of local authorities to upgrade their institutions to university status. The change in name had little significance in practical terms, but greatly boosted the institutions' reputation and also that of the cities in which they were located. When in about 1990 the Russian Ministry of Education permitted higher education institutions to choose the names they wanted, an overwhelming majority of the institutes quickly changed their name to "University".

In North Korea such independent is still unthinkable, and in 1982 there were 186 institutes in the whole country. Of these, twenty-two are industrial, eleven are medical, sixteen are agricultural, twenty-four are pedagogical, two are for foreign languages, seventy-seven are factory-managed, one is musical, one is fine arts, one is for theater and drama, one is for sports, two are correspondence and three are special (directly managed by relevant Ministries, not by the Ministry of Education).²¹⁾ The entire structure and proportions are rather like institutes in the Soviet Union. It is interesting, that, for some reason, in the 1920s all Soviet universities lost their medical departments and since then the training of medical doctors has been the responsibility of the Medical Institutes. This pattern is followed in North Korea. The only notable difference between the two systems of higher education is probably the existence of a large proportion of so-called "Factory-Managed Institutes" (kor. *kongjang taehak*) in North Korea. These institutes are attached to big factories and provide them with qualified technical

personnel. A similar type of higher education exists in Russia (rus. *VTUZ*), but it is not even remotely so popular.

Generally speaking, Kim Il Song University is considered to be the most prestigious institution in North Korea, although there are several comparable institutes. One of these is the Institute of Foreign Relations which, not unlike its Soviet counter-part, is all but inaccessible to individuals without the right (i.e. influential) connections; another is the Institute of Foreign Languages. The popularity of these two institutions derives from the fact that their graduates have fairly good employment prospects overseas, a very prestigious and profitable possibility.

It also interesting that North Korea still retains two different types of teacher training college: the Teachers' Institutes (kor. *kyowön taehak*) and the Pedagogical Institutes (kor. *saböm taehak*). The latter have a four year curriculum, while at the Teachers' Institutes students study for three years (up until 1977 - for 2 years).²²⁾ The very name, *kyowön taehak*, is a direct translation from the Russian (rus. *Uchitel'skij institut*), while the term *saböm taehak* for Pedagogical Institute reveals a more interesting story: the name was borrowed from the Chinese or Japanese where it was and is still widely used as a translation of the English "Normal College". The Teachers' Institutes which trained elementary and middle school teachers existed in the USSR from 1934 to the late 1950s, but later were either transformed into Pedagogical Institutes or were closed. However, North Korea did not follow suit and still has both Pedagogical Institutes and Teachers Institutes (mainly for educating elementary school teachers). Until 1967, they also trained teachers for middle schools, but in 1967 this task was the sole responsibility of the Pedagogical Institutes.²³⁾

Each university or institute consists of faculties (rus. *fakultet*/kor. *hakpu*) which in turn are composed of departments (rus. *kafedra*/kor. *kangjwa*). Classes begin on 1 September, and the academic year is divided into two semesters. Since 1957, the North Korean academic year has started on 1 September. In the late 1950s, it considered of the 1st semester (from 1 September to 20 January) and the 2nd semester (from 10 February to 15 July). Compared to the Soviet structure, the only difference is that the summer vacation was slightly shorter; the Soviet university summer vacation normally started on 25 June. In

1963, when tensions with the Soviet Union were at their peak and the North Korean authorities tried to rid themselves of some Soviet-models, there was a brief attempt to return to the Japanese tradition (dominant prior to 1957), and academic years were rescheduled to commence in spring. In 1969, however, there was a return to the Soviet pattern, though not without some modifications. In the early 1990s, North Korean students commenced classes on 1 September, took their winter vacation between 1 January and 1 February, and resumed classes from 1 February to 11 July;²⁴⁾ at the end of each semester students sit examinations. Vacations for North Korean students are nominal, since they normally spend time on obligatory work assignments in the countryside. In the 1950s, this was by no means typical for Soviet students, but later the same trend (to a lesser degree) also emerged in the USSR. However, in the USSR vacation labor was semi-voluntary and always paid (on rare occasions, well-paid).

The examinations in North Korean higher education institutions are conducted according to Soviet tradition. Almost all examinations are oral. The examiner prepares a few dozen questions which are written on small sheets of paper (two or three unrelated questions on every sheet), then laid face-down on a table. Every student approaches the table and selects a question sheet. Thus questions are distributed randomly.²⁵⁾

IV. Political Indoctrination

North Korean institutions, like their Soviet counterparts, pursue not only education but also indoctrination. Initially in the 1950s, the North Korean educational authorities followed Soviet example, but lately serious differences in attitude between the two countries have become apparent. North Korean propaganda has intensified with time, while Soviet indoctrination efforts began to lose momentum in the 1960s. North Koreans also rely on more direct propaganda; political subjects are taught as early as kindergarten and elementary school, where pupils have to study subjects such as "The Childhood of Kim Jong Il Song". In the Soviet Union, political subjects were taught only in higher education institutions,

although many ordinary subjects taught on elementary and secondary level were heavily loaded with propaganda.

According to Soviet tradition, all university and tertiary students were required to study so-called "social-political subjects" concerned with various aspects of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. In spite of the gradual de-ideologization of Soviet society in the 1960-80s, the number and teaching time devoted to such subjects was constantly increasing. In the 1980s, all Soviet students had to take courses in CPSU history, Dialectical Materialism, Historical Materialism, Political Economy and Scientific Communism. These subjects were by no means popular among students, who mostly regarded them as a waste of time. North Korean students studied similar subjects until the 1970s. In the 1958/59 academic year, the list of obligatory subjects commonly included "The History of the Korean Workers' Party", "The Foundations of Marxism-Leninism", "Marxist Political Economy", "Marxist-Leninist Philosophy" and "Party Policy" (slight differences in curriculum occurred according to the type of institution).²⁶⁾ In the mid-1970s when Kim Chi-song, later a defector, was a student at the Kim Ch'aek Politechnical Institute, he studied "Dialectical Materialism", "Historical Materialism" and "Political Economy of Socialism and Capitalism". However, since the late 1970s all these subjects have been replaced by subjects dealing mostly with Kim Il Song and his *chuch'e* theory.²⁷⁾

However, in both countries ideological indoctrination is a large part of the function of youth and children's political organizations. In the early 1960s a student of Soviet education noted that, "the work of the Soviet school is so closely linked to that of youth organizations that [these organizations] can fairly be described as an integral part of the educational system".²⁸⁾ This remained true until the fall of the Soviet Union, and remains so even more in the case of North Korean.

The structure of political organization in a North Korean school or higher education institute was also modeled on the Soviet pattern. The leading role is played by *Saröch'ong* (*Sahwoejuüi rodong ch'öngnyön tongmaeng*, Korean Youth Socialist Workers' League, prior to 1964 *Minch'öng*) which is an exact copy of the Soviet *Komsomol*. Membership, which initially was both a privilege and a duty, is now to all effects compulsory,

and in 1994 there were approximately five million *Saroch'öng* members in the DPRK.²⁹⁾ All school children above the age of fourteen can join *Saroch'öng*, but in practice *en masse* enlistment is impossible. Instead, only a handful of the best students are promoted to *Saroch'öng* at the beginning. Later on, when the students are approximately fifteen years ago, more are allowed to join. For even older students membership is obligatory; they are coerced into joining, and by graduation an overwhelming majority of students are *Saroch'öng* members. Like in the Soviet Union, a nonmember is not normally permitted to go on to higher education (in the USSR membership was a condition for entry into the best institutions only).

In middle of secondary school, the *Saroch'öng* committee is the central body directing the organization's entire activity. In theory, it is elected and formally independent, but in practice its composition is determined by teachers and school administrators; only the "election" of a new chairman is formal. Tong Yöng-Ju, a defector who in his school days was a *Saroch'öng* chairman, recounts a typical "election" scenario.³⁰⁾

Compared with the Soviet *Komsomol*, the Korean *Saroch'öng* is a much more active organization and has more impact on the life of its members. Even in the early 1950s when *Komsomol* was at its most influential, meetings took place only once a month, whereas in North Korea meetings are held a few times each week. *Saroch'öng* pays much attention to military training while this aspect of *Komsomol* activity is marginal.

In elementary and middle schools there is also a special political organization for younger students called *Sonyöndan* (the Children's Union). It was founded in June 1946 and by the mid-1950s, membership was practically obligatory for students between the ages of nine and thirteen years. *Sonyöndan* was modeled on the Soviet Young Pioneers and even the main *Sonyöndan* rituals follow the Soviet pattern (however, it worth mentioning that the founders of the Soviet Young Pioneers also borrowed much from the Western Scouts, although they were most reluctant to admit so). In Korea, like in Russia, only the best pupils could be the first to join *Sonyöndan*, while for older students membership is practically obligatory. To be one of the first *Sonyöndan* members in one's class is a great honor, and children strive to be among the chosen few. Membership is

taken very seriously in both the Soviet Union (from my own reminiscence) and in the DPRK (according to the writings of defectors).

The structure of *Sonyöndan* is identical to that of the Young Pioneers. The highest level of organization is at the school-level. Following its Soviet counter-part, *Sonyöndan* employs military-like terms extensively; the school organization, in the USSR called *druzhina* (old Russian for "regiment"), consist of "detachments" (rus. *otrjad*/kor. *pundan*) which, in turn, consist of "group" (rus. *zveno*/kor. *purjo*). Normally, every class is a "detachment", while a "group" has five to ten members. Members of the *Sonyöndan* wear special uniforms; their main symbol is a red necktie of particular triangular form.³¹⁾ Traditionally, this necktie is considered to be a symbol of eternal unity between the Party, *Saroch'öng* and *Sonyöndan*, while in reality, it is an article borrowed from the Soviet Pioneers. However, the Soviet Pioneers were also not the inventors of the necktie, but, back in the 1920s, simply made good use of the necktie of the boy scouts!

Both the Soviet Pioneers and *Sonyöndan* are extremely ritualistic organizations. The *Sonyöndan* entrance ceremony is a rather solemn ritual, usually awaited with great excitement and anticipation. The ritual is held in a stadium, or in some other public place, with the participation of teachers, parents and local party functionaries.³²⁾ The children wait in rows. A defector recalls that, "[F]or the children who had still not entered *Sonyöndan*, it (the ceremony - auth.) was an object of expectation. (...) A city level functionary reads the Solemn oath which is repeated by the children, then parents and teachers come to the children and put the red neckties on them".³³⁾ The whole procedure is virtually indistinguishable from the Soviet one, though the North Korean text of the Solemn oath is shorter and includes mention of Kim Il Song and, recently, Kim Jong Il. The Korean *Sonyöndan* and the Soviet Young Pioneers even have the same motto, "Be prepared!" "[I am] always prepared!" (rus. *bud'gotov _ vseгда gotov!* / kor. *chunbihaja _ hangsang chunbi!*), and the same greetings which vaguely resemble military salutes.

The everyday activity of *Sonyöndan* is not totally unfamiliar to Russians, an overwhelming majority of whom were once Young Pioneers. *Sonyöndan* members gather old iron and paper for recycling (not because of environmental concerns which were

generally alien to North Korean and early Soviet ideology, but in order to provide industry with more raw materials), clean streets and yards annexed to their schools, and grow rabbits for meat and fur. They are also engaged in numerous military-like parades and in studying politically correct songs about The Great Leader and his heir. In earlier periods, until World-War II, the goose-step and singing were among the most popular (officially-approved) pastimes of the Soviet Pioneers, though later, when their organization grew more formal and when the military lost some of its former appeal, the popularity of these activities declined. Another difference is that while in the USSR the activity of the Pioneers virtually ceased during the summer vacation, the young North Koreans continued to visit their schools regularly and participate in many events organized by the *Sonyöndan*. This is understandable since vacation leave and distant trips common in the Soviet Union before *perestroika*, are not affordable to North Korean parents, and North Korean children have to spend their summer in the vicinity of their school.

V. Degrees and Positions

Since in the colonial period North Korea did not have a developed system of higher education, it is only not unexpected that the entire structure of North Korea universities and institutes generally follow a Soviet pattern. Among those teachers with degrees there are two groups; full professors (rus. *professor*/kor. *kyosu*) and associate professors (rus. *dotsent*/ kor. *pukyosu*). In Russian institutions, there is an additional lower position not part of the North Korean hierarchy, that of assistant professor (rus. *assistent*)³⁴⁾ Teachers without degree qualifications are normally ranked as senior lecturer (rus. *starshij prepodavatel'*/ kor. *sanggüp kyowön*) and lecturer (rus. *prepodavatel'*/kor. *kyowön*).

The structures of academic degrees in North Korea differs considerably from the Anglo-Saxon model. It was based on the Soviet pattern which was established as early as 1934 and which, in turn, is an adaptation of the German model. This likeness is not surprising when it is considered that until 1960,

the vast majority of North Koreans scholars with advanced degrees had received training in Moscow or Leningrad. In the Russian and North Korean system, there is no such a qualification as a Bachelors degree, rather a university student graduate with a diploma. However, after graduation, s/he can enter a post-graduate school (rus. *aspirantura*/kor. *yönguwön*) where in three to four years s/he prepares a thesis. Once the thesis is approved, the scholar is considered "chunpaksa" (rus. *kandidat nauk*), the rough equivalent of a Ph.D. However, the holder of this degree may, if s/he wishes, get an even higher degree which is called *doktor* in Russian and *paksa* in (North) Korean. This further process normally takes ten to fifteen years, and only few scholars attempt it. Both higher degrees are awarded by universities and institutes, but this award is to be confirmed by a special control body, directly run by the government.³⁵⁾

Like the USSR, the DPRK has a special body which is responsible for conducting most scientific research. This body is called an Academy of Science (rus. *Akademija nauk*/kor. *kwahakwön*) and is, for practical purposes, a self-governing Ministry of Science. The Academy is governed by a council of full members (rus. *akademik*/kor. *wönsa*), usually well-known scholars and/or academic administrators who periodically vote new scientists into their circle. Full membership is a tenured position which may not be withdrawn. In Russia, where the Academy has a long tradition dating back to 1724, it was very influential and has operated rather independently from the authorities even during Stalin's times. In later periods, Soviet authorities tolerated a rather high level of critical expressions among Academy members. In the Soviet tradition of research management, the Academy was considered to be an essential, even irreplaceable, institution and most communist countries either re-organized their Academies according to Soviet standards or, if they had not previously had such institutions, established them along soviet lines; North Korea did so in 1952. However, in the DPRK, the Academy did not become a stronghold of moderate free-thinking, but was instead strictly controlled by the authorities.

In both countries the Academies run a wide variety of research centers, and also operate educational institutions. A majority of

their research institutes (rus. *institut*/kor. *yōnguso*) have sections where post-graduate students can prepare their theses. Usually (but not always), people who graduated from a graduate school remain as scholars in that school.

VI. Some Remarks in Conclusion

Each country of the former communist block has been influenced by the Soviet educational theory and practice. There were at least three important reasons which made such an influence inevitable and these reasons apply not only to education, but to many other spheres of the social and economic life as well. First, the "sovietization" was a result of more or less direct pressure from the soviet authorities and their local representatives. For them, the obedience to a Soviet standard was a major indicator of the new regimes' loyalty to Moscow. Secondly, the new local authorities, often rather insecure politically and unexperienced administratively, also prefer to cling to the Soviet models which were considered to be tested and quite suitable for a future socialist society. Third, the increasing cooperation between communist countries also made some degree of unification desirable if not unavoidable.

The degree of "sovietization" was rather different. In many countries local education traditions were retained and only slightly modified. However, in North Korea Soviet impact was particularly strong due both to the lack of modern educational tradition (especially in regard to tertiary education); and political weakness of new regime which was heavily dependent on initial Soviet support.

In the late 50s and early 60s the North Korean authorities decided to rid of some Soviet patterns. It resulted from deterioration of political relations between Moscow and Pyongyang after 1956. However, this deterioration placed the North Korean educational (and, more broadly, ideological) authorities in an awkward position. From one point of view, in the late 50s they would be happy to uproot many institutions of the Soviet origin. At the same time, they simply could not find any adequate replacement for such institutions, since pre-1945 Korean experience was obviously "contaminated" by the

Japanese colonial influences. The vast majority of North Korean teachers and education managers had also been trained in the Soviet tradition and considered it the only viable one. The North Korean educational ideologues found a Solomon solution of the problem. They retained most institutions and structures, but began to conceal their foreign origin or even invented mythical "pure Korean" explanations for some traditions. For example, *Sonyöndan* which is an obvious carbon copy of the Soviet Young Pioneers, was proclaimed a heir to some children communist organizations which allegedly existed in Manchuria in the 1930s. Therefore, after the early 60s the Soviet-inspired pattern of North Korean education remained much the same. In later periods North Koreans continued to adopt some ideas of Soviet educations, but were very reluctant to recognize any kind of foreign influence.

In the course of time the developments of educational systems in 2 countries were proceeding in slightly different direction. The Soviet education practice eventually became less ideological and rigid (but, probably, somewhat less effective, especially as an indoctrination tool) then it used to be in the 40s, while the North Korean schooling not only retained some traits of original zealocy, but become even more rigid, more overload with ideological tasks.

Footnotes

- 1) Among many recent books (not to mention articles) on the subject, to name just a few: Dong-gyu Kim [1990] *Pukhan-üi kyoyukhak (North Korean Educational Theory)*, Seoul: Munjansa, Dong-gyu Kim [1990] *Pukhan kyoyuk-üi chomyöng (A Study of North Korean Education)*, Seoul: Munpoposa, Dong-gyu Kim [1990] *Pukhan kyoyuk (North Korean Education)*, Seoul: Üryu munhwasa.
- 2) In 1949, for example, G.I. Tunkin, a prominent Soviet diplomat and counsellor at the Soviet Embassy informed Moscow: "Pak Dong-jo handed me the draft of Pak Hon-yong's speech for the meeting on 14 August and conveyed Pak Hon-yong's request for our views on the project. I responded that we would remark on the project after it was translated into Russian" (*Record of conversation between G. Tunkin and Pak Dong-jo*, 9 August, 1949; Archive of Foreign Policy of Russian Federation, fond 102, opis 5, papka 11, delo 8, list 21). It seems to be very unual then.
- 3) *Pukhan kyoyuk*, 22.
- 4) Jae-gün Yun etc [1991] *Pukan-ui munhwa chöngbo (Information on North Korean culture)*, Seoul: Koryöwön, vol.1, 110.
- 5) *Pukhan kyoyuk*, 116-117.

- 6) For detailed graphs depicting the historical development of the North Korean education system, see: Dong-gyu Kim, 120-127.
- 7) Ūn-ryong Yō [1994] "Chojik saenghwal-eso ch'olmullatton inmin hakkyo saenghwal (Life of a [North Korean] Elementary School is absorbed by Political Lift". im Nae-ga padūn pukhan kyoyuk, seoul, Kyoyuk kaebal wōn, 48-49.
- 8) *Pukhan kyoyuk*, 249.
There is additional information in: Jae-gūn Yun etc [1991] *Pukan-ūi munhwa chongbo (Information on North Korean culture)*, Seoul: Koryōwōn, vol.1, 143.
According to Dr. Man Gil Han, however, this information may be unreliable.
- 9) For example, Yōng-sōn Yi who entered elementary school in 1964, wrote that, "In North Korean society one cannot find any elementary school where male and female students study together" (Yōng-sōn Yi [1984] *Chayūnya, chuguminya (Freedom or Death)*, Seoul, Sinwōn munhwasa, 33.
- 10) In 1996, Ruk-jae Yi entered a co-educational elementary school with separate classes. See: Tong-ik Sō [1993] *Inmin-ūi sanūn mosūp (Life of [North Korean] People)*, Seoul, Charyowōn, Vol.1, 107.
- 11) For a description of an abortive attempt to abolish co-education in the USSR see, for example, Nigel Grant [1965] *Soviet Education*, London, University of London Press, 41.
- 12) For a list of subjects offered in North Korean schools, see *Pukhan kyoyuk*, 246-248, 261-267. A list of those offered in Soviet schools may be found in: Joseph Zajda [1980] *Education in the USSR*, Pergamon press, 71.
- 13) *Pukhan kyoyuk*, 29. I was able to visit these interesting places a several occasions. Children (aged four to six years) were required to memorize the names of Il Song Kim's family members and stories about the childhood of the "Great Leader". They were also expected to be able to locate Il Song Kim's home and other places of great significance on a large relief map of Mangyondae - Il Song Kim's native village.
- 14) In the DPRK, secondary school graduates cannot choose their jobs themselves, but must obey the decision of a special "distribution committee", although these committee normally takes their wishes into account (a system which has no parallels in the Soviet Union).
- 15) Myōng-se Kim "Na-ūi Kim Il Sōng taehak hakch'ang ojōl (My Studies at Kim Il Song University)", in Nae-ga patun pukhan kyoyuk, 194.
- 16) Naewoo t'ongsin, #9866 (12 January, 1996).
- 17) Some stories of this kind could be found in Bu-song Kim's book, himself briefly a member of such a committee (Bu-song Kim [1976] *Nae-ga p'an ttanggul (The tunnel I dig)*, Seoul: Kapjamunhwasa) and in some books written by other defectors. These stories are no doubt widely used by South Korean propaganda generators, but there is nevertheless no real reason to question their general plausibility.
- 18) Even in Stalin's time the children of prisoners were, more often than not, given the opportunity to go to university. My great-grandfather (a schoolteacher and former Red Army officer who was unlucky enough to have a run in with a local boss) was executed in December 1938, but that did not prevent both his daughters from subsequently entering Tomsk University and Krasnoyarsk Pedagogic Institute (though they prudently concealed how their father had died). In the DPRK which has probably the world's tightest political control system, this would not be possible.
- 19) *Pukhan kyoyuk*, 287.
- 20) *Pukhan ch'onglam: 1983-1993 (North Korean Review: 1983-1993)*, Seoul, Pukhan yonguso, 1995, 752.

- 21) *Pukhan kyoyuk*, 286.
- 22) Jae-gün Yun etc [1991] *Pukan-üi munhwa chongbo (Information on North Korean culture)*, Seoul: Koryöwön, vol.1, 203.
- 23) Jae-gün Yun etc., vol.1, 201.
- 24) Jae-gün Yun etc., vol.1, 143.
- 25) Interview with Dr. Man Gil Han, Seoul, 31 July 1996.
- 26) Tong-kyu Kim [1989] *Pukhan-ui taehak-kwa taehaksaeng (North Korean College and College Student)*, Seoul, Minjok t'ongil hyöbüi hwe, 30.
- 27) Chi-söng Kim. "Kwahak kisulja-rül yangsöngghanün Kim Ch'aek kongdae (Kim Ch'aek Institute education engineers and scientists), in: Nae-ga patün pukhan kyoyuk, 216.
- 28) Nigel Grant, 62.
- 29) Chungang Ilbo, 19 July, 1994.
- 30) Yöng-jun Tong. "Na-üi ch'öngnyön sijöl-kwa saroch'öng hwaldongün iröhayötta (My Youth and Saroch'ong Activity), In Nae-ga patün pukhan kyoyuk, 124.
- 31) Among many sources on Sonyoundan organization and activity, we can mention only a firsthand record of a defector: Su-hyon Paek [1994] "Nae-ga kyökkün sony:ndan hwaldong (My experience with Sonyondan)", in: Nae-ga patün pukhan kyoyuk.
- 32) The very solemnity of the ritual makes its description a commonplace in reminiscences about North Korean life written by the defectors and published in Seoul. For example, see: Hyon-hui Kim [1991] *Ije yöjaga twego sip'oyo (I want to become a woman)*, Seoul: Koryöwön.
- 33) Hyon-hui Kim.
- 34) Interview with Dr. Man Gil Han, Seoul, 31 July 1996.
- 35) *Pukhan yongö 300 sönjip (Collection of 300 North Korean terms)*, Seoul, Naewoo t'ongsin, 1993.
- 36) In October 9, the DPRK Cabinet approved "an order #133" about the establishment of Academy, and since December 1 it started its practical activities. See: Tong Kim, p.88.