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CHOSEN ASPECTS OF INTANGIBLE
AND TANGIBLE LEGACIES OF CONFUCIANISM
IN NORTH KOREA

1. Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to discuss intangible and tangible assets related to Confucianism in North Korea. The study shows that there is a dichotomy between official discourse, the adherence of the North Korean leaders to Confucian values, and the policy toward Confucian and neo-Confucian assets existing in North Korea. The study aims also to demonstrate that Confucian and neo-Confucian assets on the List of National Treasures of North Korea are used for several purposes which were not the primary ones of these monuments. The method which is used in this research paper is based on an analysis of various historical sources appropriate to analyze the place of Confucianism in the framework of North Korea. Confucianism dominated the culture of Korea during the Joseon period (1392–1910).

The term culture covers various aspects of society, including architecture, art, doctrine, and language. Monuments constitute a part of the tangible assets of the culture. The study is based on a vast number of North Korean documents which were collected by the author between 2002 and 2022. Most of them are not only unavailable within European libraries but also online. A limitation of this study is the limited number of sources written in the North Korean dialect of the Korean language. Some of these documents are works and statements of the family of Kim Il-sung,¹ the first president of North Korea, which should be treated as political propaganda. The works of the Kims can be analyzed and cited as an example of distorting the history of this country. The author also owns a few documents related

DOI: 10.4467/23538724GS.23.007.18153

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¹ This article generally follows the McCune-Reischauer transliteration system or its most popular form. Korean names are written in different ways not only in Latin-script languages, but also in the Korean language variants themselves. For example, transcription of Lee is “I” (이) in South Korea and “Ri” (리) in North Korea. Some words naming cultural assets in the North Korean documents used in this research paper may be different from the names used following the McCune-Reischauer system.

to Confucianism written in the North Korean dialect of the Korean language but he acknowledges that these documents represent only a small number of the publications related to this subject. This previous remark is important as documents written in the North Korean dialect of the Korean language have content that is quite often different from those published in a Western language and published by North Korean publishing houses. This is due, among others factors, to the fact that state publishing houses present a different image of North Korea to its citizens in comparison to that offered to foreigners.² Publications that are destined for foreigners are usually more liberal than those aimed at North Korean citizens.

The answer to the research issue will allow us to determine the real place of Confucianism in the foundations of North Korean society from a tangible and intangible perspective, and to determine whether Confucianism is a cultural and economic tool of North Korean government policy. This essay is divided into two parts. Part one is related to the mentions of the Confucian legacy in works theoretically written by North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un. The second section offers a very brief typology of Confucian and neo-Confucian legacies in the list of National Treasures of North Korea. Finally, this section will also mention the legacy of Confucianism studied by North Korean scholars.

2. Confucianism in the thought of leaders of North Korea

2.1. References to Confucianism in the thought of Kim Il-sung

North Korea was established based on ideological differences, because of which most Confucian ideas were eliminated from the life of this part of the peninsula's population. However, Kim Il Sung³, the first leader of North Korea used the Confucian ideas of absolute obedience, subordination, and hierarchy to create his system of government called "Juche". "Juche" is a political doctrine that assumes self-sufficiency in four areas: ideology, foreign policy, economy, and defense.⁴ To strengthen the role of leaders, a corresponding religion of the new state was also created through the Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic

² This observation was verified through the most recent five study visits that the author made to the Korean Peninsula. The author visited several research centers and compared the same documents published in the North Korean dialect of the Korean language and in Western languages.

³ Kim Il-sung was a Korean politician and one of the founders of North Korea; he was initially chosen by Soviet communists as the head of North Korea in 1948. Later he strengthened his position being Prime Minister of North Korea between 1948 and 1972 and President from 1972 until he died in 1994.

⁴ S.K. Kim, "Juche (Self-Reliance)," in: *North Korea. The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 2017, pp. 1–3.

Ideological System announced by Kim Il-sung in 1967.⁵ These principles are a set of issues “which establishes standards for governance and guides the behaviors of the people of North Korea”.⁶

From a historical perspective, Isabelle Sancho considers that Confucianism is sometimes mentioned by scholars as an explanation for the Juche ideology in North Korea as well as for the dynastic nature of the North Korean regime. North Korea’s political ideology, Juche, has been shown to incorporate elements of Confucianism. In Kim Jong-Il’s 1982 essay “On the Juche Ideology,” loyalty and filial piety are emphasized, which are also central tenets of Confucianism. The Juche emphasis on people-centered politics similarly reflects Confucian principles of governance. This fusion of ideologies allows the hereditary transfer of power, a characteristic of the patriarchal system, to be secured with minimal difficulty.

This standpoint is generally adopted by Russian scholars who tend to underline the focus placed on filial piety and loyalty in North Korea’s official propaganda. The reason may be that for the main scholars from the post-soviet era, the main difference between North Korean ideology and Marxism-Leninism lies in the Confucian legacy of pre-modern Korea.⁷ However according to other scholars, there are some similarities with but no relations between North Korean ideology and Confucianism.⁸ These similarities will be presented below.

From 1945 to 1954 the North Korean political system repudiated Confucianism and its historical legacy, which was considered responsible for the problems faced by North Korea. For example, starting from the 1950s, the regime’s first reforms promulgated by Kim Il-sung were processed through a land reform that aimed at destroying colonial institutions.⁹ North Korean communist institutions confiscated land and properties possessed by the Japanese, thus eradicating the economic base of the traditional kinship community. The first stage of this socialist reform used many ideological slogans calling for the abolition of established feudalistic institutions, but it did not directly challenge the basic ideological roots of Confucianism in Korea. The state’s coercive reform was successful in abolishing feudalistic culture. It is also evident that it weakened overall traditional culture and institutions such

⁵ I.S. Kim, *On the achievements of our Party Policy toward intellectuals*, Workers’ Party of Korea Publishing House, Pyongyang 1968.

⁶ J.I. Kim, *On some problems of education in the Juche Idea*. Talk to the Senior Officials of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, Pyongyang 1987, p. 1.

⁷ I. Sancho, *Does Confucianism matter in the study of Korea?* Doctoral dissertation, Exchange Program for European Lecturers, The Association for Korean Studies in Europe, 2015; J.W. Kang, “Political uses of Confucianism in North Korea,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 2011, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 63–87.

⁸ N. Levi, “Correlations between the contemporary ideology of the North Korean and chosen Confucianism values,” *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 2015, no. 3, p. 122.

⁹ N. Levi, “Legalistic thought in North Korean ideology,” *Hemispheres* 2020, vol. 35, p. 83.

as Confucianism, which according to North Korean propaganda organizations was associated with feudalistic institutions. Anti-Confucianism was also a major part of the China of Mao, culminating in the Confucius-hostile Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).¹⁰ Isabelle Sancho emphasizes that according to North Korean authorities, Confucianism is the ideology of oppressive elites and illustrates the backwardness of pre-modern Korea, which did not take the path of historical progress driven by the masses of the people.¹¹

Below are some examples of how Confucianism is criticized in the biography of Kim Il-sung entitled *With the Century*: “My father said that he attended this school in order to receive a modern education. He had no desire to learn the difficult Nine Chinese Classics that had been taught at Confucian schools.”¹² “It was after we began to run the school that the subjects which inculcated nationalist and feudal-Confucian ideas were discontinued and political subjects were included in the curriculum.”¹³

Between 1948 and the early 1960s, the traditional Confucian expression “show filial piety to parents” was not used officially in the state’s suppressive mobilization and was also criticized in Kim Il-sung’s works: “This came as a great shock to the people who were steeped in the old way of thinking, their minds soaked in the feudal moral view and Confucian idea on filial piety”¹⁴.

Buildings of Confucian schools were also partially used as institutions providing a socialist education: “It was around this time that village schools which had been teaching the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius were transformed into institutions for modern education and encouraged the younger generation to kindle the spirit of patriotism.”¹⁵

From an institutional perspective, in this period, Kim Il-sung was highly dependent on his Soviet advisors, such as, Terenty Shtykov and Nikolai Lebedev, who recommended that he implement a Stalinist regime in North Korea. North Korea was a new country on the political scene and its leadership was based on Russian senior politicians who were mainly educated in the Soviet Union or Korean communists such as the previously mentioned Kim Il-sun, but also Ho Kai-I or Nam-il. From an ideological perspective, two years after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, Kim Il-sung introduced the Juche Idea, his ideology based on “independence, self-reliance” and on some Korean social and historical concepts. According to ideologists, Juche is based on the idea that “man is the master and decides

¹⁰ S. Hu, “Confucianism and contemporary Chinese politics,” *Politics & Policy* 2007, vol. 35, no. 1, p. 139.

¹¹ I. Sancho, *Does Confucianism matter...*, p. 1.

¹² I.S. Kim, *With the century*, vol. 1–2, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang 1995, s. 9.

¹³ *Ibidem*, s. 176–177.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 343.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, s. 83.

everything.” At the beginning (the term Juche was used for the first time by Kim Il-sung in December 1955), the Juche Idea was formulated as principles that the government uses to justify its policy decisions.¹⁶

Kim Il-sung criticizes Confucianists as people who are keen on non-political activities, making them not useful for North Korean society: “Even when the feudal rulers who had fallen prey to worship of great powers were idling their time away, reciting the Confucian scriptures and chanting poems about the beauties of nature, the people were putting their distinguished talents to use and producing works of art worthy of world praise. With technicians they invented the original mighty turtle-shaped armoured ship, the world’s first iron-clad warship”.¹⁷

To justify the independence of the North Korean model, Kim Il-sung had also to copy Confucian patterns. The North Korean Constitution of 1972 itself identifies the family as a cell in the body of the society and the State as an organ looking after its cells (Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: adopted at the First Session of the Fifth Supreme People’s Assembly of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, 1972, art. 63). The primary goal of using this socialist family/cell ideology was to integrate the family into the state. The North Korean constitution eliminated all traces of feudalism and focused on the party and Suryŏng (the leader) that were seen as being in revolutionary service to the socialist state.¹⁸ For Maoists, Confucianism was the ideology of the ruling class. Mao considered that Confucius was a spokesman for a decadent slave-owning aristocracy.¹⁹ Chinese authorities even launched anti-Confucianism campaigns, a move that was not followed in North Korea.²⁰

The Theory of the Large Family, rooted in Marx’s belief in dissolving the existing bourgeois family system, has emerged as a key governance discourse in North Korean ideology. While socialist states like China and the Soviet Union sought to change their family systems in line with Marx’s ideology, they ultimately deviated from his vision of communal living and instead saw a rise in nuclear families. North Korea, on the other hand, sought to undermine the patriarchal system and dissolve families through women’s liberation, a strategy that gained momentum under Kim Il-sung’s reinforced regime in the 1970s. The theory of the large family

¹⁶ J. Miller, “Kim Jong-il: North Korea’s Dear Leader who he is, what he wants, what to do about him,” *Korea Observer* 2004, vol. 35, issue 2, p. 351.

¹⁷ I.S. Kim, *The Korean revolutionaries must know Korea well*. Political document, 1943, p. 9.

¹⁸ I.S. Kim, “The duty of mothers in the education of children. Speech at the national meeting of mothers, 16 November 1961,” in: *idem, On the work of the Women’s Union*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang 1971.

¹⁹ R. Boer, “Confucius and Chairman Mao: towards a study of religion and Chinese Marxism,” *Crisis and Critique* 2015, vol. 2, issue 1, p. 37.

²⁰ S. Hu, “Confucianism...”, p. 142; *Workers, Peasants and Soldiers criticize Lin Biao and Confucius*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1976.

then transitioned into the Family State, intertwined with domestic revolution and social-political life theory, resulting in heightened regulation of residents and a call for unwavering loyalty to the leader. Significantly, the Theory of the Large Family aligns closely with North Korean-style Confucianism.

Kim Il-sung considers the Confucian ideology as feudal and an ideology that justifies the domination of the Korean Peninsula by third states such as Japan or by dynasties of China. “With the gradual decline of the nation’s strength and the infiltration of the feudal-Confucian idea, worship of big powers raised its head higher. The feudal-Confucian idea, which was prevalent in the days of the dynasty, was blindly worshipped by the nobility. The feudal-Confucian idea preached that a small country was obliged to serve a big country and this was a “great obligation” and natural duty to be observed by the small country. The ruling circles worshipped this idea which openly preached sycophancy. It is by no means fortuitous that the enlightenment campaigners of the modern age lamented that our people were so deeply steeped in the Confucian idea that they knew only about the big countries and nothing of their country from a young age and in the end lost the spirit of loving their country.”²¹

However, Confucian culture became a propaganda tool to increase the regime’s stability from the late 1960s. This traditional Confucian culture tended to strengthen the function of the family as a cell. That is why Kim Il-sung, considered as the head of the “Korean family” was frequently described as a person with Confucian virtues.²² For example, the Party openly describes Kim Il-sung as a god – the “Sun of Love” – “superior to Christ in love, superior to Buddha in benevolence, superior to Confucius in virtue and superior to Mohamed in justice.”²³ Furthermore, Confucian thinking compares the political system to the human body, where the country leader is like the brain and the people are the body that must carry out the leader’s decisions and commands. A similar applicable Confucianism analogy is that of a wise, all-knowing father who takes care of the loyal nation. Koreans being used to these concepts, Kim Il-sung was, therefore, able to use them in propaganda to encourage a kind of collective political loyalty to support his regime.

Concerning military affairs, Confucianism was also criticized by Kim Il-sung: “The commanders, who came from Confucian aristocratic backgrounds, had wished to restore the royal government, whereas the men, who came from among the populace, had demanded the reform of the outmoded system. The conflict and contradiction between them had seriously affected their fighting efficiency. Some of the die-hard Volunteers commanders who advocated the restoration of

²¹ J.I. Kim, *Worshipping big powers and depending on foreign forces is the way to national ruin*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang 1961, pp. 4–5.

²² D.A. Miller, *North Korea*, Greenhaven Press, New York 2003, p. 31.

²³ J. Becker, *Rogue regime: Kim Jong Il and the looming threat of North Korea*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 77.

the old system had even organized battles simply to win fame in the hope of receiving official appointments from the government. Such practices had broken the unity of the army.”²⁴

2.2. References to Confucianism

in the thought of Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un

In 1967, when the twenty-five-year-old Kim Jong-il, the successor of Kim Il-sung, emerged at the head of the Organization and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), state-dominated discourse about Confucian culture entered active political discourse. For the first time “Ŏbö” (아버이/“father” or even “parents”) discourse emerged and was linked to the full-scale ideological legitimization of the stable socialist family state. This eventually led to the formation of the previously mentioned “father” discourse. There are changes in the titles used to refer to Kim Il-sung. He was called “General” after liberation, and “Leader” or “Premier.” However, this began to change after the mid-1960s with the utilization of the term *Our father Kim Il Sung the Ruler*.²⁵ Official ideology was composed of terms related to religious terminology, such as “faith”, and “miracles,” which are deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The final aim of North Korean ideology was to build a “heaven on earth,” which recalls religious goals. Kim Jong-il also created a large pantheon of North Korean leaders and heroes who participated in the struggle against the Japanese and in the Korean War. According to the author of this paper, this framework may be defined as follow: Kim Il-sung (the North Korean “God”), Kim Jong-il (“Jesus”), and Kim Jong-suk (the mother of Jesus “Mary”), and other members of the Kim family. Kim Jong-il also elaborated a major cult of his father Kim Il-sung. Kim Il-sung started to be a representation of the image of the State Emperor who is the “father of the nation,”²⁶ and a “sage” who can be “a teacher.”

Kim Jong-il, after inheriting Kim Il-sung's supreme political power, tried to theoretically justify his absolute power and advocate a new Confucian form of socialism. This can be illustrated by his thesis *Theory of the Socio-Political Organism* published in 1987. In the process of the Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il father-to-son transfer of power, the North Korean regime consequently restored the traditional logic of “loyalty and filial piety” in political discourse. The transformation of North Korean society's Confucian culture set out in the process of ideological justification a type of Confucian family-state that went to extremes in the union of loyalty and filial piety. The aim of Kim Jong-il was that justification was accomplished

²⁴ I.S. Kim, *With the century...*, s. 353.

²⁵ See: J.W. Kang, “The Domestic Revolution” Policy and Traditional Confucianism in North Korean State Formation: A Socio-cultural Perspective,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 2006, vol. 10, issue 2.

²⁶ C.S. Hunn, “Korea Reports Death of Official Guiding Succession,” *New York Times*, 5.06.2010.

when filial piety at home extending to filial piety in the one social family was in accordance with loyalty to the state. Starting in 1967, children were taught to respect not only their parents but also the parents of Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung. According to defectors, the Confucian principle of filial piety was even reinforced concerning the son's duty to his parents during Kim Jong-il's regime. In the 1980s, young people were more often taught to consider what their parents had done for the country during their lifetimes.²⁷

Concerning the question of equality between men and women, the notion of the subordination of women was also strengthened during Kim Jong-il's reign. According to the Confucian model of society, women had to occupy a position lower than men. An interesting sentence regarding this issue and extracted from the biography of Kim Il-sung *Within the Century* is provided below: "Our women's resistance to a foreign enemy has differed historically in its style and method, but what has always been true is that their resistance in most cases has assumed a passive form based on the feudal Confucian view on chastity."²⁸

From a more symbolical perception, during the era of Kim Il-sung, Confucianism was still viewed as being a pattern strictly connected to feudal values, which were opposite to the monolithic leadership of Kim Il-sung: "During his tours of field guidance in South Hamgyong Province, from July 17 to August 12, 1967, he made sure that Party organizations eradicated revisionism, parochialism, and nepotism through scrupulous meetings for ideological struggle, and powerfully elicited the revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses, which had soared through the ideological struggle, to a great upsurge in economic construction. In the crucible of the all-party ideological struggle waged amid the great concern of Comrade Kim Jong Il, all sorts of miscellaneous ideas such as bourgeois and feudal-Confucian ideas were gradually eradicated."²⁹ "Comrade Kim Jong Il keenly grasped and checked the crafty plotting of the anti-party revisionists who were tactfully spreading bourgeois and revisionist ideas and feudal-Confucian ideas through broadcasting and the media and creating a dissipated life among young people under the name of the Ten-Year Plan and such like. Comrade Kim Jong Il laid bare the true colors of anti-Party revisionists as political schemers and swindlers. Posing as leadership core they schemed to emasculate the monolithic leadership of Comrade Kim Il Sung."³⁰

To provide a softer image of North Korea, recent North Korean publications acknowledge Confucianism's positive impact on the framework of the Korean Peninsula. "Sonjuk Bridge was initially called Sonjuk Bridge when it was built in the early Koryo dynasty. It became famous after Jong Mong Ju (1337–1392), who was

²⁷ Interview with a North Korean defector. The interview took place in an undisclosed place in Europe in September 2022.

²⁸ I.S. Kim, *With the century...*, s. 184.

²⁹ J.I. Kim, *Brief history*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang 1998, s. 23.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, s. 24.

a loyal official and Confucian scholar in the closing years of Koryo, was assassinated on the bridge, and was so renamed because it was told that a bamboo sprouted on the spot he was killed.”³¹

The Sonjuk bridge mentioned above is not directly related to Confucianism, being a bridge from the Koryo dynasty (918–1392) and built in 1290. There is however a relation with the Confucian scholar Jong Mong-ju. Kim Jong-un stresses that the legacy of Korean history shall be maintained, however simultaneously devaluing philosophies and religions in the design and evolution of North Korean society. “The history museums, folk parks, and folk streets in the capital city and provinces should be renovated as a way of preserving the national identity”³².

On the one hand, we demonstrated that the reception of Confucianism in the official discourse of North Korean leaders, based on a literal approach, denotes an almost total antipathy towards Confucianism. From another perspective, by observing the cognitive processes of these same leaders, we notice that there are similarities in terms of values with Confucianism. These values are evoked in a book authored by Sung Chul Yang entitled *The North and South Korean Political Systems, a comparative analysis* as being: 1) Loyalty to the leader; 2) Taking care of one’s parents with respect; 3) Establishing trust between friends.³³

I would define these values as belonging to the immaterial heritage of Confucianism. We must also bear in mind that this immaterial heritage is only partial, as it does not consider all the immaterial heritage of Confucianism that exists in North Korea, such as certain values not mentioned above. It is possible to extrapolate these selected values in the North Korean context through the following historical facts. Loyalty to the leader is omnipresent in North Korean political literature. This loyalty affects not only those who are close to the leaders but also all those who have a material situation that can be considered to be above average. So, for example, this loyalty concerns businessmen and diplomats who, by way of thanks to the leader, pay an annual sum of money to those who manage the accounts of the North Korean executive. As for looking after his parents with respect, Kim Il-sung always wanted one of his sons to succeed him. No one else was considered. The disputes between Kim Il-sung’s descendants have been discussed at length by some authors.³⁴ Ultimately trust between friends is seen through the process of

³¹ “Sonjuk Bridge,” *Democratic People’s of Korea* 2021, no. 110, p. 4.

³² J.U. Kim, *National Heritage Conservation is a patriotic undertaking for adding brilliance to the history and traditions of our nation*. Talk to Senior Officials of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea 24 October 2014, p. 6.

³³ S.C. Yang, *The North and South Korean political systems: A comparative analysis*, Routledge, New York 2019, pp. 13–14.

³⁴ W.J. Dziak, K. Sajewski, *Korea Północna. U źródeł rodzinnej sukcesji władzy*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa 2009; N. Levi, “A Biography of Kim Pyong-il, the Second Dauphin?” *Parallax* 2010, 7(1), pp. 33–46.

loyalty described above. This trust is established between those who accept the fact of being loyal to the leader. If some are loyal to him, then they belong to the same group and irrevocably trust each other.

There is not, and has not been, a single Confucianism – there are differences among what is taught in books, what is the practice of people coming of age, what is official political-bureaucratic Confucianism, and what are the cultural practices that grew out of all of them. The quoted leaders in this essay referred rather to political-bureaucratic Confucianism. It is here that we see a dialectic between the literal approach of the North Korean leaders toward Confucianism and the practical application of these values. However, outside the cognitive context, there is an ambiguous relationship between this immaterial Confucianism and material heritage. The latter exists in North Korea. These are monuments that are situated on the geographical territory of North Korea. This material heritage is alive because it is maintained by North Korean and foreign funds. This material heritage will be described in detail in the second part of this article.

3. A brief typology of the Confucian and neo-Confucian legacies on the list of National Treasures of North Korea

Some of Confucianism's legacies are included in the list of National Treasures of North Korea. However, there are also some other Confucian and neo-Confucian tangible assets that are not incorporated in this list.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a descriptive analysis of these assets. A national treasure is a cultural property that has been evaluated as a cultural relic by the Cabinet of North Korea according to its historical significance and formative artistic value and has been registered by the Central Cultural Relics Conservation Guidance Agency of North Korea. The list of national treasures of North Korea is based on one hundred and ninety-three monuments and includes six assets related to Confucianism. Sixty-three of these total assets are related to Buddhism.³⁵ The other one hundred and twenty-four assets are mainly related to the history of the Korean Peninsula and have no affiliations with religious issues. In any case, Kim Jong-un considers that historical legacy (with no affiliations to religious issues) is the foundation of a good education: "Proper educational work should be conducted by means of the cultural heritage of the nation and the history education bases."³⁶

³⁵ N. Levi, R. Husarski, "Buddha under control. Buddhism's legacy in North Korea," *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia* 2021, no. 34, p. 92.

³⁶ J.U. Kim, *National Heritage Conservation...*, p. 7.

Table 1. Confucian and neo-Confucian legacies on the list of national treasures of North Korea as of 2022

Classification on the list of national treasures of North Korea	Name	Name in Korean	Localisation
14	Ryonggok Academy	룡곡서원	Direct-administered city of Pyongyang
45	Changsong Provincial School	창성향교	Pyongan North Province, county of Changsong
79	Sohyon Academy	소현서원	South Hwanghae Province, county of Pyoksong
127	Koryo Songgyungwan Academy	고려성균관	Special city of Kaesong
128	Sungyang Academy	숭양서원	Special city of Kaesong
129	Phyochung Pavilion	표충비	Special city of Kaesong

Source: Own research based on available North Korean documents.

Among these six Confucian assets, five are related to the education field and are named temples. Regarding the remaining Confucian assets, there is a pavilion. Below, we provide some brief descriptions of the most important Confucian legacies in North Korea: “The Ryonggok Academy is the most important Confucian legacy in North Korea. The Ryonggok Academy is in the capital city of Pyongyang. It was designated as number fourteen on the list of national treasures of North Korea. The Ryonggok Academy was built in 1656; the sanctuary is located on the slopes of Mount Ryonggak about ten kilometers from Pyongyang. The Ryonggok Academy was damaged by fire in the early 1710s and rebuilt in 1713. It is one of the three main North Korean academies. The Ryonggok Academy can be visited by foreigners at least since 1959.”³⁷

Number forty-five of this list is the Changsong Provincial School, located in the Pyongan North Province, county of Changsong. It is a Confucian school. The building stands halfway up the hill, exposed to the south, some 300 m away from Nae Stream, which runs through the county seat. It was set up in the early days of the feudal Joseon as the first institution to teach the children of the aristocratic class in the village feudalistic Confucian ideas and ethics. It is written on the ridgepole of the building that was reconstructed in 1765. In front of the building is Myongryun Hall, erected on an

³⁷ V. Glomb, E.J. Lee, M. Gehlmann, *Confucian Academies in East Asia*, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 467–469.

embankment faced with stones. It is 15.4 m in front and 5.6 m on the side, has no walls, and is gable-roofed with double eaves. At the back of the hall are found Tong-mu and So-mu, gabled houses with double eaves built on a terraced ground facing each other. Taesong Hall which stands behind them is also a gabled house with double eaves, measuring 11.15 m in front and 7.1 m on the side. Its pillars and roof brackets are dovetailed, and slender-ribbed doors are attached that can be pushed aside. Changsong Confucian School has the unique features of composition and placement common to such buildings of those days, thus representing the contemporary architecture of Confucian schools.³⁸ The Changsong Provincial School is the only hyanggyo on the list of national treasures of North Korea.³⁹ A Hyanggyo was a government-run provincial school established separately during the Koryo Dynasty (918–1392) and Joseon Dynasty. The Changsong Provincial School is a tourist attraction open to foreigners.

Number seventy-nine is the Sohyon Academy. Its localization is in the South Hwanghae Province, district of Pyoksong. The Sohyon Academy is a private Confucian academy. This institution was founded by the renowned Choson dynasty scholar Yi I (1536–1584) born on the territory of North Korea. Interestingly, the works of Yi I (Yi Yulgok is the pen name of Yi I, which is more often used by Korean scholars) were studied by North Korean researchers dealing with Confucianism, such as Kim Chang-won. The Sohyon Academy is a tourist attraction, which was among others visited by the author of this essay.

Number one hundred and twenty-seven is the Koryo Songgyungwan Academy, located in Kaesong. Kaesong is a North Korean city that escaped devastation during the Korean War.⁴⁰ The Koryo Songgyungwan Academy was the highest institution of education during the Koryo period. Established in 992, it taught Confucianism and other abilities indispensable to feudal government officials for dealing with political and practical matters after graduation. The Koryo Songgyungwan Academy consists of over 20 big buildings, including the Taesong Hall and the Myongryun Hall, and it is the biggest wooden structure preserved in North Korea. As it retains the appearance of a national institution of learning in the Koryo period, it is a precious cultural heritage, showing the education system and architecture of those days, and it is an objective material artifact making clear the relations of historical succession between the Koryo dynasty and the feudal Joseon dynasty.⁴¹ The Koryo Songgyungwan Academy has no religious education functions as of 2023, but is focused on light industry sciences.

³⁸ Y.H. Jin, "Changsong Confucian School," *Democratic People's Republic of Korea* 2013, no. 3(687), pp. 22–23.

³⁹ K.H. Jang, C.H.A.E. Uri, "Achievements in Studies of North Korean Cultural Heritage and Future Prospects," *The Review of Korean Studies* 2020, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 242.

⁴⁰ E. Chabanol, "Study of the Archaeological and Historic Sites of Kaesŏng," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch* 2005, vol. 80, p. 33.

⁴¹ Y.H. Jin, "Changsong Confucian School...", pp. 22–23.

Number one hundred and twenty-eight is the Sungyang Academy, located in the city of Kaesong. The Sungyang Academy is a private school typical of architecture in the days of the feudal Joseon dynasty. The Sungyang Academy was built in 1573 on the site where the Confucian scholar Jong Mong-ju's house stood. It has a similar architectural style to the Koryo Sungkyunkwan Academy and is an example of the layout of a school in those days.⁴² The Sungyang and the Ryonggok Academy are considered the only two neo-Confucian seowon on the list of national treasures of North Korea.⁴³ A seowon was the most common educational institution in Korea in the second part of the Joseon dynasty. Number one hundred and twenty-nine is the Pyochung Pavilion, located in Kaesong. The Pyochung Monument consists of two monuments dedicated to the fidelity displayed by the previously mentioned Confucian scholar Jong Mong-ju (1338–1392), and they are the largest and most excellent in artistic terms among old Korean monuments.⁴⁴

These places are attractive and receive many local and international tourists. There is even a tendency to transform Confucian institutions into museums. For instance, the Sungyang Academy, since August 1987 houses the Koryo Museum. These cultural institutions have historical buildings devoted to the Koryo dynasty and among others a collection of celadon. The Koryo Songgyungwan Academy was transformed into the Kaesong University of Light Industry and inaugurated in 1992. "Since Juche 81 (1992), the Koryo Sungkyunkwan Academy, proud of its 1,000-year-long history, has developed into a university training technical personnel in the field of light industry inaugurated in 1992."⁴⁵

Furthermore, despite its Confucian framework, visitors learn about American aggression and the hypothetical splendor of Kim Il-sung, who effectively reconstructed the country. Paradoxically, the politicization of Confucian temples almost deprives them completely of anything related to traditional Confucianism. Confucian legacies are also presented regularly in the English-speaking North Korean press. The legacy of Confucianism is also preserved by the policy of the WPK: "The historical remains in Kaesong showing in a many-sided way the phases of the times and culture at each stage of the development of long history are now preserved and managed as precious assets of the country thanks to the correct policy of the Workers' Party of Korea on preserving national cultural inheritance"⁴⁶

It is also important to note that some Confucian scholars are respected in North Korea. According to Isabelle Sancho, the best example is the person of So

⁴² S.G. Kim, "Historical Remains in Kaesong Named UNESCO World Heritage Sites," *Democratic People's Republic of Korea* 2013, no. 10(694), pp. 21–22; "Sungyang Confucian shrine," *Democratic People's of Korea* 2021, no. 4.

⁴³ K.H. Jang, C.H.A.E. Uri, "Achievements...", p. 242.

⁴⁴ "Pyochung Monuments," *Democratic People's of Korea* 2021, no. 4, p. 95.

⁴⁵ Y.H. Jin, "Changsong Confucian School...", pp. 21–22.

⁴⁶ S.G. Kim, *Historical Remains...*, pp. 21–22.

Kyong-dok (1489–1546). So Kyong-dok was a Confucian scholar from the early Joseon period (1392–1910). Born in Kaesong, this Confucian scholar has appeared as an exceptional sage and popular hero in numerous tales, dramas, and films.⁴⁷ One of his assets is the fact that he was born in Kaesong, which under the name of Songdo was the capital city of the Koryo dynasty (918–1392).

According to the analysis of the Korean Language Dictionary (조선말대사전) published in 1992 by the Linguistics Research Institute of the North Korean Academy of Social Sciences (사회과학원 언어학연구소), it appears that criticism of Confucianism, which is described in ideological terms as a “reactionary worldview” in the 1980s, was later softened, thus implicitly allowing North Korean researchers to work on Confucian studies.⁴⁸ More recently, several North Korean scholars have published research on Confucianism. The most famous scholar is named Chong Song-chol. However, such research is not made available abroad but is mainly published in the North Korean research journal named *Ryoksa Kwahak* (Historical Science) or *Saboe Kwahak Hakpo* (Academic Social Science).

From a more global perspective, as of January 2023, according to the websites of the main North Korean universities, there are neither departments nor institutes of religious studies in any other universities in this country. This demonstrates that the issue of religious studies in North Korea is still cautiously managed by the authorities. The history of religions is, however, more widely taught to North Korean citizens who study at the Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies and who are supposed to work abroad.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The purpose of the author of this essay was to demonstrate that Confucianism in North Korea has a multidimensional meaning. Based on this research, the following conclusions can be drawn. On the one hand, when we come to certain material assets relating to Confucianism, we can see that they are used by the North Korean government for financial purposes to alleviate the country’s economic difficulties in proportion to their value. On the other hand, these economic and operational functions are in total contradiction with official North Korean discourse, which

⁴⁷ I. Sancho, *Does Confucianism matter...*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ I.S. Jong, 북한 종교해석이 순화됐다 *Pukban chongkyobaesöki sunhwatwaessta* [Proven North Korean interpretation of Religion], 3.02.1993, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/legacy/legacy_general/L321256.html (accessed: 5.01.2023).

⁴⁹ Interview of the author with a North Korean defector. The interview took place on September 25, 2022, the name and the place of the interview will remain undisclosed for security reasons.

considers Confucianism to be one of the causes of the servility of the population of the Korean peninsula.

This dichotomy shows that North Korean ideology is not set in stone. It adapts to the context, to social and economic needs, and uses the assets at its disposal.

The regime does not deny the existence of Confucianism but places it clearly as a relic of the past with relatively negative connotations. Paradigmatically, the North Korean framework is closer to the Western vision of history that sees the present and future as better than the past. There are however some exceptions made with references to ancient times, especially to the Koryo dynasty. The only reason why Confucianism persists in North Korea is its utility for the political organizations of North Korea and its economic benefits. The main function of these assets is purely aimed at earning foreign currencies by making them available to tourist delegations. It helps with promoting tourism and softening the image of the North Korean regime. That is why the North Korean regime protects and utilizes these treasures. From a more cultural perspective, there are no clear data regarding the exact Confucian legacy in North Korea. In the field of archeology in North Korea, there is no regular archaeological survey that has been recently carried out; this is a high barrier to assessing the religious legacy in North Korea. Some excavations were undertaken during the Japanese colonial period and, more recently, by archaeologists from North Korea; however, there are not only no available data but also no verifiable data for foreign researchers.

As for the immaterial aspects of Confucianism, despite the North Korean propaganda texts that openly criticize Confucianism, we can see that certain values of this philosophical and religious movement are taken up by those same leaders in the performance of their duties. This shows that the ideologues are proposing a narrative that runs counter to what the country's leaders think in order to achieve certain goals. This dichotomy may be synonymous either with a lack of sincerity on the part of the North Korean leadership or with a policy that will use any means to achieve its ends.

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SUMMARY

The purpose of the paper is to discuss the intangible and tangible assets related to Confucianism in North Korea. The study aims to demonstrate that there is a dichotomy between the official discourse, the adherence of the North Korean leaders to Confucian values, and the policy toward Confucian and neo-Confucian assets existing in North Korea. The method which is used in this essay is based on an analysis of various historical sources relevant to the description and analysis of the functions of Confucian and neo-Confucian assets in North Korea. It is concluded that the concepts of filial piety and the role of women were culturally transformed. This essay is based to a large extent on North Korean documents. It also briefly mentions North Korean researchers who studied Confucianism and neo-Confucianism in the Korean Peninsula. The answer to the research problem will allow us to determine what the place is of Confucianism in the official discourse and in the cultural heritage of North Korea. The essay also provides elements explaining why Confucian and neo-Confucian tangible assets constitute cultural and economic tools of North Korean government policy.

STRESZCZENIE

WYBRANE ASPEKTY NIEMATERIALNEGO I MATERIALNEGO DZIEDZICTWA KONFUCJANIZMU W KOREI PÓŁNOCNEJ

Celem artykułu jest omówienie niematerialnych i materialnych elementów dziedzictwa związanych z konfucjanizmem w Korei Północnej. Autor stawia tezę, że istnieje dychotomia między oficjalnym dyskursem, przywiązaniem przywódców Korei Północnej do wartości konfucjańskich a polityką wobec konfucjańskiego dziedzictwa istniejącego w Korei Północnej. Badania opierają się w dużej mierze na dokumentach północnokoreańskich. Odpowiedź na postawiony problem badawczy pozwoli określić, jakie jest miejsce konfucjanizmu w oficjalnym dyskursie i dziedzictwie kultury Korei Północnej. Autor odpowiada na pytanie, dlaczego materialne dziedzictwo konfucjańskie jest narzędziem polityki kulturowej Korei Północnej.