A Comparative Study of the Leadership Perspectives of “Suryongship” from Kim Il Sung’s Juche Ideology, and Unification Thought’s “Three-Subjects” Leadership

Do-Young Yoon
Assistant Professor
Cheongshim Graduate School of Theology
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1. Introduction

There is no organization without a leader. The leader has absolute impact both on the inside and outside of an organization in modern society, and leadership has been known to be the most important factor having impact on the achievements of the organization. Thus, discussion on the importance of leadership is not new.

Moral and ethical behavior in leadership has been extensively studied since 1980. The leadership models which have been in the limelight recently, include Principled-centered leadership, Level-5 leadership, Servant leadership, and Authentic leadership, and these have also emphasized ethical categories. Moreover, researchers who study leadership have come to pay more attention to bad leadership, thus expanding the horizons of the research. Then, the important issue arises as to how to characterize a good leader and bad leader. Why/how does a bad leader emerge and what results are brought by him/her? What are the features or traits of bad leaders? What can we learn from the leadership styles of bad leaders? It seems to be evident that a discussion about bad leadership will have important implications for the research about the leadership in general.

The leadership of the North Korean senior leaders (the Kim family) is one of the most vivid examples of bad leadership. This case study (of the Kim family) is not easily accessible due to the closed nature of the society in the North, but several researchers have shown interest in it just because it is the clearest example of such a study of bad leadership. There might possibly be several factors informing the bad, even drastic, leadership behavior, and these have a global echo, but we can most easily, and with most benefit, focus on the unique leadership of the North Korean senior leader.

North Korea, which is the most unique community or organization among existing nations, also
shows very unusual aspects in leadership. What implications can we draw from the leadership style of the
tenor leader of North Korea? The most evident one is the leadership behavior of North Korean leaders
(Kim, Il-sung, Kim, Jong-il and Kim, Jong-eun) which manifests a constant and systematized leadership
behavior which, in the last analysis, is unlike other bad leaders, who instead follow their heart and act
spontaneously. The NK style shows that North Korea has been ideologically established based on a strong
philosophical foundation, unlike other organizations and communities, and the leadership of North Korea
exercises its power based on the theoretical base of Kim, Il-sung “Juche ideology.” So, understanding the
feature of North Korean leadership through the philosophy of governance will be very meaningful.

Remarkably, the Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology of leadership is central to the NK system of thought as a
whole. This leadership concept is called "Suryongron," so, to understand the leadership image and system
of North Korea we must first understand Suryongron. I think we can broaden the scope of our
understanding of bad leadership in general, and of North Korea in particular, by examining Suryongron,
the core of their philosophy and the primary factor leading to the results of the bad leadership behavior of
North Korea.

On the other hand, the ”three-subjects idea” is explained in the appendix of Unification Thought, and
this concept also elaborates the image of an ideal leader. The three-subjects idea has important
implications on the development of ethical leadership, which is the current important trend of the recent
leadership research achievements, even beyond its philosophical and religious meaning. It elaborates the
image of a moral and selfless leader, which can become the highest peak of ethical leadership. This study
mobilizes the three-subjects idea, mentioned in the appendix of Unification Thought, as the antipode in
the critical comparison with the Suryongron of Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology, especially from the
viewpoint of leadership. Through this comparison, our research on leadership can be standardized
because these are the two extremes, when considering morality and ethics, and I argue that such a
comparison can serve as a guiding theory through which we can collect data about all other leadership
theories. The “three-subjects thought” can serve as new theoretical model for ethical and moral leadership.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is as follows.

First, it examines the Suryongron concept of Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology from the viewpoint of
leadership. Second, it surveys the three-subjects idea of Unification Thought from the viewpoint of
leadership. Third, I argue that an integration of the three-subjects idea and Juche thought can serve as a
viable new leadership model.

2. A Consideration of Suryong-ship

Suryong usually means a leader of a group. But, it is sublimated to a concept which acts as a ruling
principle, beyond the dictionary definition in North Korea. That is, it was just a term which forced North
Korean citizens to espouse Kim, Il-sung as a senior leader in 1970 but its concept was transformed into
the revolutionary viewpoint of Suryong, which insisted that citizens should show loyalty to Suryong and
follow the leadership of Suryong, in order to establish their subject-hood.

The ensuing power struggle, which had been continued after Kim, Il-sung seized power in North Korea, was concluded in late 1960. The power of Kim, Il-sung became intensified and his unitary leadership was announced. A practical system for governance was necessitated rather than a merely theoretical ideology as the end of the power struggle, and the outline of the leaders became evident. That is, it meant the justification of the power of Kim, Il-sung.

The importance of Suryongron as a revolutionary philosophy necessarily emerged. The systematization of revolutionary Suryongron was catalyzed by Kim, Jong-il, and not Kim, Il-sung. Kim, Jong-il said that Suryong is "the great brain of the working masses and the center of unification and unity.". According to the "The Unabridged Dictionary of Korean," published in Pyongyang, the definition of Suryong is as follows:

Suryong is the person who leads creative activities of the mass of people to realize and unify the independent demand and interest of the public and the greatest leader who wins respect and arouses admiration of the public ... ... our well-beloved Kim, Il-sung is the suryong who we, the public, greeted first and looked up to.

Speaking conclusively, the essence of suryongron is a concept similar to that of absolute power, popular in the Middle Ages, or Baroque Ages. A leader is always needed to establish a socialist state, and the power of suryongron is considered as absolute and great. The suryong leader is an absolute, sacred, and inviolable being, and it is insistently held that the superiority of the suryong can be maintained only through direct descendants who reflect it well. It means that the state can be continued only through the hereditary succession of power. In other words, the suryong is glorified as a father and God beyond that of a mere senior leader in the Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology. So, followers should obey his teaching and control.

Criticism of suryongron philosophy usually converges on two points.

First, it is hard to believe that such an absolutely superior leader like a suryong can actually exist in the real world. Can an errorless person, with no defects, actually exist?i If a person like a suryong exists as the leader of a country or an organization, which leadership traits would be necessary for a suryong to embody to actually be errorless? A suryongron takes an irrational position on this point. There are insufficient grounds to logically objectify the features of a suryong, in those documents which mention "revolutionary suryongron".ii So, surely, it can be criticized that there is insufficient evidence to explain the reason behind the superiority of suryong. How does a suryong actually express good leadership in an organization? This is not clear.

Second, scholars assert that it is just an expedient measure to justify the worship of the Kim, Il-sung family line and the beautification project of the lineal line and, furthermore, it also seems to possess a logical limit. In North Korea, the family of Kim, Il-sung is espoused much like a religion, those places
related to them are considered sacred, and their whereabouts become idolized. Still, there are many doubts as to the origin of their privileges. So, suryong is considered by scholars to be more religious and doctrinaire, rather than scientific and realistic. Scholars assert that there is a deliberate intention of beautifying a feudal, one-man dictatorship and hereditary monarch, hiding behind an assertion which itself lacks scientific logic, practicality, applicability, and any supportive examples or cases.

This study will argue concerning the following three characteristics of the leadership of suryong.

First, the suryong is a fighting/struggling/revolutionary leader. The North Korean society was established based on the anti-Japanese struggle of Kim, Il-sung and, in a similar manner, the leader exercises his revolutionary leadership toward the utopia of socialism. This belligerence and revolutionism result from the dialectical view of the world, which are reflected in the aims of the Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology and the socialism of North Korea. Suryong, the leader of revolutionaries is a dialectical person who should struggle constantly in the Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology, philosophically based on the dialectical historical development. The leader who leads the community towards achieving the revolution through struggles should have strong charisma, offer a vision towards the utopia, and be considerate towards the community members, thereby making them more productive. These features can be found in antigovernment-revolutionaries, fighters for independence or NGO activists who lead social movements. The fact that suryong is a struggling person who leads the revolutionaries means that the leader’s environment of leadership is quite limited. The period when the revolution is needed is only when there is social chaos in social views, technical limits in industrial views, and unsuccessful achievements in the organizational views. Such a time of social turnaround can happen to any society, nations and/or organization. In the academic world, the leadership during such a turning point is known as “transformational leadership.” So, the leadership of a suryong is not a leadership that can be applied to just any situation; rather, it is an appropriate leadership only in those situations where the customs, that is, old or out-moded customs, of the turning point itself should be completely broken down.

Second, according to the documents of the Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology, the suryong is described as a leader without defects, that is, errorless. There has been no leader who did not have some defect or another. No leader has ever been assessed as “perfect,” regardless of the criteria used, whether as a person, or in terms of family history, vision, listening skills, communication, persuasive power, decision-making, patience, sociality and/or technological skills. Most leaders are introduced as exemplary leaders, and they can be superior in some of these aspects. So, the assertion that suryong is the perfect person with no defects is rather hard to believe. Is there any good reason why the leader who leads revolutionaries to achieve the ideal socialist state must be such a perfect person with no defects? I agree that the factors of leadership needed for revolutions would need to be relatively greater than in other kinds of situations. Many scholars who study transformational leadership report that it needs a great deal of leadership abilities because the organization faced with changes, and the leader leading the group, must face the objections of the older generation and the older practice, and they should perform at a high level of
performance, or in line with many alternatives. But, it is not evident that the leader should be perfect in all aspects. It would be a very religious description to say so; it's like a thesis which supposes the Catholic Pope as a person with no defects. In the Catholic world, the Pope is considered to be errorless (especially when speaking “ex cathedra”), as a perfect leader without defects. The authority of the Pope is absolute. The Pope can not acknowledge his defects, even though he may have defects. The Pope, elected through conclave, receives that authority. Documents of Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology are very similar to this. It supposes that the suryong who leads socialist revolution should not have any defects and that the suryong should never acknowledge that even though he may have them. The Juche concept shows well the religiously oriented nature of suryong leadership.

Third, the Suryong is a leader, and beyond that, a father figure. In the documents, slogans and media of North Korea, the suryong is described as a “father”. This expression is an oriental and Confucian expression, not found in Western societies. In a patriarchal society of the Orient, leaders are usually symbolized as an image of the father. Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology is different from other ideas because it aims to establish an ideal Confucian society, and the fact that the public sees Kim, Il-sung as a father, and Kim, Jong-il and Kim, Jong-un as his successors is an exemplary case. Interestingly, in Kim, Il-sung. Juche ideology the suryong is described as being the father of a big family, which is North Korea. The suryong is symbolized as the brain of revolutionaries and an absolute and cold-hearted authority. But, at the same time, there is the image of the leader as a humane and warm-hearted leader, that is, a father of the primary group. Kim, Jung-suk, a wife of Kim, Il-sung and a mother of Kim, Jung-il, is unnoticed, but Kim, Il-sung is venerated as a suryong so it means that the leader with paternalistic authority is far more emphasized. The “comrade,” mentioned in Marxist theory, does not include the meaning of family. The family has been considered as an evil custom, one which should be exterminated, in a communist society. But, the Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology acknowledges the existence of the family, thus bravely embracing an Oriental concept which holds that the father is the leader of the family. The concept of family is not taboo in oriental socialist countries like North Korea or China. Especially, North Korea establishes the concept of a father leader by replacing “one-groupism” with “big family-ism.” The route of familial paternalism and revolutionary struggling co-exist in North Korean society. The leadership of the suryong is very unique in this view. In modern society, where equal rights for both sexes are globally standardized, North Korea is the nation where paternalist leadership governs supreme.

3. Consideration of “Three Subjects Leadership”

The concept of the three subjects is explained in the appendix of "Unification Thought," and this mentions the ideal leader and ideal leadership. There are three kinds of leaders, including the parents of a family, teachers in schools, and the heads of organizations, and the three subjects is accomplished when these three leaders together practice the true love of God. These three leaders should practice the true love
of God, the parents of a family should raise children, and teachers of schools should teach students; the heads of groups should supervise and take care of human resources and all things. But the concept of triple subjectivity, expressed in Unification Thought, is not an independent or mutually exclusive one. In a family, parents are parents, teachers and owners; in a school, teachers are teachers, parents and also owners; and in corporations or nations, owners are owners, parents and teachers. So, this triple subjectivity is a complex and multidimensional concept.

The triple subjectivity is judged to be an innovative leadership concept in terms of the following aspects.

First, the current leadership study comprehensively includes social science. Pedagogic studies hold the image of leaders as teachers, family science studies the image of leaders as parents, and business administration and political science deal with leaders as managers or rulers. But, no study or theory accomplishes the unity of parenting, teaching, and supervising at the time, as the way to become a good leader. So, it is surely a new model. One might call this a “triplex model.”

Second, the unified image of an educator, a parent and a supervisor is like a dream of leadership in the eyes of those scholars who study leadership. In a rapidly changing modern organizational society, it is very idealistic to think that there might exist a leader who teaches members well, and whose members follow the leader as a parent, and who receives absolute support from the wider public. So, such a “triplex” leader is rarely, if ever, found in corporations, nations, or NGOs. But, surely, such a person is not a complete impossibility. It is quite rare, but there are occasionally such leaders as are held in great honor. Mother Theresa, for example, surely would come close to this triple subjects leadership. Maybe, this leadership is

Third, the three subjectivities concept can serve as an alternative concept with the capacity for solving various dilemmas. In most organizations and nations, leaders are people who manage or lead. Scholars have explored the various leadership features, in search of a new concept in order to make administration and guidance easier.iii Consequently, mixing the various features, which scholars suggest, we come to the leader, of which members of modern organizational societies dream, as basically a respectable person. Regardless of the organization or society, the members invariably require that those whom they can respect, venerate, and thank, to become leaders. This has something of a thread of connection with the suryongron. People do not want their leaders to be “common” or “ordinary.”viii The Suryongron-ship of NK knows this point clearly. The leader of three subjectivities is the very leader who can receive extremely high veneration from the people. The leader of three subjectivities is not a common person by any means. Then, who is a respectable person? To most people, those persons who taught them, raised them, helped them or set an example for them, is respectable. To sum up, the person, mentioned above, is a teacher, a parent and an owner. So, the three subjectivities is the best concept and to summarize, even symbolically, and encompass all three aspects of the respectable person.
Fourth, the concept of “三光” (king, teacher, and father is one) of Confucianism is a concept most similar to the concept of the three subjectivities. It is the leadership of a noble man. The difference between them is that Confucianism does not mention God or conscience and Unification Thought clearly mentions the ultimate origin of all leaders is God, and the expression of leadership as the practice of the love of God. Then, from where does the respect come? From where does the character of respectful leaders come? To answer this question, Unification Thought assumes that God is an invisible existence, and solves these questions logically by assuming the existence of God as the origin of altruism. This point is quite different from that of the suryong-ship of NK. In Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology, Kim, Il-sung suryong is a person who suddenly appears from “somewhere” by the need of the public and society, but the origin of his character is completely omitted.

Fifth, attention to, and theorizing about, leadership, based on religious ideas, can be stimulated by studying the concept of the three subjectivity leadership.

Sixth, the three requirements: that the leader should teach members, should become parents, and should exercise a responsibility as an owner, can serve as a new signpost for modern leadership development. The leadership teaching model is highly developed, but its terminology is excessive and randomly used, not to mention confusing, and many of the words which express its meaning are overlapping. As a result of this, the theory has become stagnant. The three areas of education I am arguing for (parents, teacher, leader), would be helpful and quite useful clustering these somewhat confusing models, and the world of leadership studies.

4. Comparison between Suryong-ship and Three Subjects Leadership

I will analyze the character of the suryong and of the three subjectivities, affiliative behavior, and task behavior and situation, by utilizing the three frames of a) leadership traits, b) leadership behavior, and c) leadership contingency, which are the basic categories of leadership studies.

First, from the viewpoint of features of leaders, suryong-ship emphasizes the absolutely perfect leader and the three subjectivity leadership emphasizes teachers. Suryong is a perfect leader in one word. The perfection of the suryong is the basis upon which he can be followed and receive veneration, because the suryong is, by definition, perfect. The public has no choice in the matter because the suryong is superior in various aspects to the public. This is to say that no one doubts Kim, Il-sung’s victory because he won one hundred times during North Korean partisan activities. It can be quantitatively expressed as 100% winning. But, the origin of this absolute perfection is not revealed, and there is insufficient grounds for any logical limits of absolute perfection. In contrast to this, the person of the three subjectivities is a
teacher. A teacher receives veneration, and develops a following due to his/her superior teaching. This is because the grounds for one’s leadership are accumulated through the gratitude of the followers. It is a persuasive argument that teachers possess a certain authority in virtue of the fact that they teach. The authority of leaders thus comes by teaching students. In modern organizations, generally, leaders are superior to members but they are venerated because they develop or nurture the members. It is the common view that leaders who ignore the development of their members, and who only focus on exerting their authority, usually find that their authority declines, or even fails, in the long run. So, Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology has faces the challenge of how to overcome the gap between the suryong and the public, like the Pilgrim's Progress. There is a problem of how to overcome the gap between the public and the suryong who grows apart, even though the public wants to come closer. Furthermore, any good teacher wishes for their students to become even better than they are.

Second, from the viewpoint of the affiliative behavior of leaders, suryong-ship emphasizes the behavior of fathers, and three subjectivity leadership emphasizes the behavior of parents. Fathers have authority as a representative of the family but the three subjectivity thought emphasizes the authorities as parents. Three subjectivity thought is considered more sexually equal and balanced because the equal rights of both genders are an uncontrollable agenda in modern society. Recently, leadership theorists pay more attention to the role of maternity, and feminine features are much reflected in components of emotional leadership, which is the most popular leadership in the world, nowadays. Feminine leadership has been considered more and more important in organizational societies. Actually, the ratio of women leaders is growing larger in many organizations, nations and companies. Reflecting on this trend, the father suryong of North Korea is far behind the times, extremely out-dated. They are in danger of incurring all the social costs relative to the emphasis on masculine leadership. On the other hand, three subjectivity thought emphasizes the leadership as parents, and strikes a theoretical balance. Parents sacrifice for children. The leader should make lots of sacrifices and offer a service to the public to be venerated as parents by the members. So, it is not at all easy to achieve the status of a parental leader and receive veneration as a “parent” and acquire a follow-ship from members, in our rapidly changing modern organizational society. Still, parent-leadership emphasizes such leadership behavior, not impossible of attainment. One must just become a good parent, a person of value to others.

Third, from the viewpoint of the task behavior of leaders, suryong-ship emphasizes revolution and three subjectivity emphasizes ownership. Suryong has a responsibility to the community as a leader of revolutionaries. But, a struggle is inescapable for dialectical revolution and this community is a fighting or a struggling community. Three subjectivity has the responsibility of administration through a mind of love as an owner. The person who administers people with official standards and takes responsibility is a "true-owner" in Unification Thought. Both the suryong and the person of three subjects own the community but their methods are very different. The suryong supervises through struggles and the three subjectivity supervises through love. The suryong is the leader who engages in extreme behavior because
he is a leader of the community with the important task of subverting the older generation through struggles. On the contrary, the true owner of the three subjectivities seeks for the harmonious and permanent, peaceful world, wherein people live harmoniously, and he is described as a leader who takes responsibility of persistent growth of the community by administrating the community with his/her expressions of love.

Fourth, considering the belligerence and revolutionism of the suryong and the altruism and peace-loving traits of the three subjectivities, the suryong is a proper leader in the situation which goes to extremes because of social discontent and inefficiency, and the thee subjectivity person is suitable to the situation where members require peaceful and gradual development.

5. Conclusion

Discussion about Kim, Il-sung’s Juche ideology and Unification Thought, from the point of leadership, has not been paid attention to by scholars. So, the scientific needs in this area are very compelling. This study aims to form the basis for a follow-up study by roughly comparing and analyzing the suryongron of Kim, Il-sung’s Juche ideology and three subjectivities of Unification Thought. I found that Suryong-ship and three subjectivity leadership have the potential to be a significant topic in leadership studies, and they have new concepts which can suggest directions to dilemmas, which various leadership studies have. This study has the value of investigating the scientific value of these two leadership philosophies from the physical scientific dimension.

I’d like to provisionally suggest the following conclusions as a result of this study.

Suryongron and three subjectivity can be new leadership models which leadership study should focus on. Also, they should be studied together rather than studied separately. Because they are very similar, in terms of logical structure, while at the same time their contents and orientations are quite different. I think future leadership study can understand it with interdisciplinary viewpoint and come to a humanistically abundant understanding through this.

On the other hand, the limits of this study are as follow.

First, it refers to many secondary data, but access to North Korean society and documents is limited. Analysis, using secondary data, can contain errors. Second, it did not investigate the philosophical discussion widely about Kim, Il-sung Juche ideology or Unification Thought, around the leadership. Maybe many scholars' opinions, which I did not confirm, could be omitted. Third, it did not utilize enough real examples of leaders which can be examples of suryong or three-subjectivity because of the constraints of time.
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ii This study assumes that the antipode of an ethical leader in an immoral leader.

iii It is described as "a person who creates revolution with a remarkable foresight, scientific insight, great leadership, love for art and the public, firm belief in revolutionary achievement of communism and indomitable spirit."
The criticism of scholars about the theory of community life which explains the relationship between suryong and nation and the public has logical hole that leave suryong out of the discussion. This theory is a secondary thing and does not exactly explain the humane feature of leader. What we should study through suryongron is the investigation about the leader traits of suryong which makes him an absolutely perfect person.

Leaders of most nations, societies and organizations are elected through the process of election and they are immanently or externally assessed.

Sin, Dong-hoon, Research on the political leadership of North Korean senior leaders, Kim, Il-sung and Kim, Jong-il, Graduate school of Korea University, Papers for a master's degree, 2011.

Humility, authenticity and voice are included.

Most members would assert that their leaders are not that good. So, it is rear leaders who receive veneration in modern society.