

Between State Ideology and Nation Branding: “Juche” in North Korea’s Public Diplomacy toward Africa

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Abstract

Unlike its image of the “hermit kingdom” in the liberal world, North Korea constantly endeavored to establish close ties with African countries during and after the Cold War. This research explores how North Korea utilized its state ideology of “Juche” for international audiences in African countries to gain recognition and exert influence. While the state ideology usually targets domestic audiences to guide nation-building and postcolonial development in illiberal states, “Juche,” which demands its people to be the master of their own fates, also functioned as a distinctive nation brand emphasizing North Korea’s anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle against the Cold War superpowers. This article interprets “Juche” as a nation brand that forged ties with decolonized African nations and legitimized its engagement with people at the unofficial level. Focusing on North Korea-Tanzania relations, this article investigates the activities of the friendship associations established between the two countries and Juche Study Centers established across African countries to promote the regime and the leadership of Kim Il Sung. While existing scholarship has approached these institutions primarily through the lens of propaganda and diplomatic history, this article reframes them as nation branding, demonstrating that African audiences were not merely passive recipients of North Korean messaging but brought their own postcolonial experiences and political commitments to the encounter. These institutions shaped North Korea’s image as a revolutionary state and a leader of global anti-imperialist struggle, which enabled further contacts with decolonized nations, liberation movements, and concrete developmental cooperation in Africa.

Keywords: North Korea, Tanzania, Friendship Association, Juche Study Center, Nation Branding

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Introduction

On January 14, 2026, *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Workers' Party of Korea, reported that “African countries, which had long suffered exploitation and plunder at the hands of imperialists, are now firmly maintaining their independent stance and vigorously accelerating the construction of a new society through their own efforts.”¹⁾ This report suggests that North Korean officials continue to follow postcolonial developments on the African continent with considerable interest, a striking reminder that Pyongyang’s engagement with Africa, however overlooked in mainstream Cold War historiography, has never completely ceased.

Contrary to its portrayal as a “hermit kingdom” in liberal discourses, North Korea consistently pursued closer ties with decolonized African nations throughout the Cold War. These relationships were mutually significant, as both North Korea and many postcolonial African states were seeking international recognition and legitimacy. Emerging in the aftermath of World War II, they shared a sense of urgency to be acknowledged as sovereign and legitimate actors on the global stage.

The stakes were particularly high for Pyongyang, which was engaged in a legitimacy battle with South Korea, a rivalry that had already culminated in the Korean War (1950–53) and continued through armed conflicts in the 1960s. As the two Koreas competed for membership in the United Nations, they each sought to build alliances with decolonized countries whose votes at the UN General Assembly could help bolster their respective claims.²⁾ In this context, North Korea not only established formal diplomatic relations but also introduced public diplomacy initiatives aimed at promoting a favorable image of the country among foreign publics. These efforts were designed to attract sympathy, solidarity, and eventually political support from across the Global South during the Cold War.³⁾

This article explores how North Korea utilized its state ideology of “Juche” to engage international audiences in African countries, with the aim of gaining recognition and exerting influence during the Cold War. Commonly translated as “subjectivity” or “self-reliance,” Juche is more accurately understood as the principle that “one must be the master of one’s own fate.” While originally formulated as a domestic state ideology, North Korea’s articulation of Juche also functioned as a tool of nation branding in the international arena. In this context, Juche came to symbolize North Korea’s ongoing anti-imperialist struggle since

1) “African Countries Striving for the Self-Reliant Development of the Continent” [대륙의 자주적 발전을 지향하는 아프리카 나라들], *Rodong Sinmun*, January 14, 2026, 6 [in Korean].

2) Benjamin R. Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World* (Stanford University Press, 2021), 9.

3) Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa* (Hurst, 2025); Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader*.

the era of Japanese colonial rule, as well as its aspiration for self-reliant development in the postcolonial world. This study examines how Pyongyang strategically reframed its ideological doctrine to forge stronger ties with African nations during and even after the Cold War. In doing so, it reinterprets Juche as a symbolic brand through which North Korea legitimized its engagement with decolonized countries, both at the official and unofficial level. The article focuses specifically on North Korea-Tanzania relations as a case study, drawing on North Korean, British, German, and Tanzanian primary sources. This case is particularly instructive, since Tanzania, unlike many other African states, promoted its own development model based on the principle of self-reliance, known as Ujamaa. Such ideological overlap enabled Pyongyang to adapt its messaging centered on Juche rather than simply export it wholesale.

North Korea's use of state ideology for the purpose of public diplomacy presents a compelling example of nation branding strategies employed by illiberal states. Pyongyang's efforts in this realm deserve greater scholarly attention, especially in light of the growing interest among authoritarian states in presenting themselves as legitimate and credible actors on the global stage following the end of the Cold War.⁴⁾ While existing scholarship has examined North Korea's engagement with Africa primarily through the lens of foreign policy and diplomatic history, this article approaches Juche as its nation branding effort. In other words, it analyzes how Juche was constructed, communicated, and institutionalized for African audiences. Juche played a central role in constructing a coherent image of a nation that could survive without external support and resist imperialist domination, regardless of the accuracy or applicability of such argument in the African context.

Following Jessica Gienow-Hecht's introduction to this special issue, this article defines nation branding as the "attempt to control the image of a state or a region, similar to that of a star or a consumer product." North Korea, like other liberal or illiberal states, historically tried to "craft, enhance, or improve the reputation of a state" through range of public diplomacy initiatives. As Gienow-Hecht further elaborates, nation branding "tackles the question of how to market the nation both at home and abroad."⁵⁾ Unlike domestic state ideology, nation branding must address both internal and external audiences in order to construct a positive image of the state and make it appear attractive enough to build diplomatic ties or initiate cooperative projects. As E. J. R. Cho notes, North Korea's approach to nation branding differs from that of many other states in that it is primarily oriented toward regime survival.⁶⁾ Juche ideology plays a central role in positioning North Korea as the legitimate actor in the anti-colonial struggle, not only for itself but on behalf of other nations and peoples suffering

4) Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Vom Staat zur Marke: Die Geschichte des Nation Branding* (Reclam, 2025), 133-38

5) Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "Nation Branding: A Useful Category for International History," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30, no. 4 (2019): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2019.1671000>

6) Eunjeong R. Cho, "Nation Branding for Survival in North Korea: The Arirang Festival and Nuclear Weapons Tests," *Geopolitics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 595, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1233665>

under imperialist domination. The ideology's emphasis on the "depredation of national sovereignty by imperialist invasions" underscores this symbolic role.⁷⁾ Consequently, Juche should be understood as inextricably linked to North Korea's nation branding strategy. This article examines the specific institutions and platforms established by Pyongyang to promote its image and facilitate engagement with African audiences, referring either directly to Juche ideology or indirectly to its core messages of anti-imperialism and self-reliance.

Previous scholarship on North Korea-Africa relations has examined a range of institutions used for cultural and public diplomacy, including friendship associations, Juche Study Centers, exhibitions, and film screenings. Benjamin R. Young characterizes North Korea's national identity as "autonomous anti-colonialism," arguing that Pyongyang actively exported this identity as its brand in the 1970s as a symbol of national self-reliance in the context of competition with Seoul.⁸⁾ He further suggests North Korea promoted Juche abroad to compete with Maoism and to enhance Kim Il Sung's image as a revolutionary leader.⁹⁾ Tycho van der Hoog identifies Juche Study Centers as key vehicles for the dissemination of North Korean soft power in Africa, noting that texts such as *Study of the Juche Idea* were circulated as ideological blueprints for postcolonial regimes.¹⁰⁾ These materials, he argues, inspired some African leaders seeking to maintain national sovereignty and political control amid Cold War pressures. Seung Hwan Ryu shows that North Korea did not always explicitly invoke Juche in its outreach, for instance in its exchange with Tanzania, where the latter already promoted its own development principle, Ujamaa.¹¹⁾ Instead, Pyongyang drew on broader themes of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism to construct what Ryu calls an "imagined affinity" based on shared historical experience. Yet these studies share a common limitation: they describe Juche primarily as a diplomatic instrument, focusing on what North Korea intended to achieve rather than on how Juche was constructed and received as a brand. This article addresses that gap directly.

Reconstructing audience reception remains a methodological challenge for historians due to the scarcity of direct archival resources.¹²⁾ Nevertheless, local responses can be inferred by examining the duration and development of state-to-state exchanges and the extent to which they developed into concrete cooperative projects. Such patterns enable assessment on how North Korean initiatives were received and to what degree they were welcomed, adopted, or appropriated by local actors.

7) Ibid., 604.

8) Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader*, 73.

9) Ibid., 79.

10) van der Hoog, *Comrades beyond the Cold War*, 74.

11) Seung Hwan Ryu, "Between Second and Third World: North Korean Use of 'Imagined Affinity' in the Socialist Globalization Project with Regard to Tanzania (1965–1970)," *Comparativ* 33, no. 3 (2023), <https://www.comparativ.net/v2/article/view/3390>

12) Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "The World Is Ready to Listen: Symphony Orchestras and the Global Performance of America," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.01005.x>

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 discusses the application of Juche in North Korea's foreign policy, shaped by the Sino-Soviet split and the rising number of decolonized African nations in the 1960s, showing a process through which Juche evolved from a domestic mindset into a central component of North Korea's nation branding. Section 3 examines friendship associations as early instruments of public diplomacy, highlighting the gap between their symbolic emphasis on cultural and grassroots exchange and their actual function as state-sponsored vehicles of top-down spectacle. Section 4 turns to Juche Study Centers, institutions specifically established to disseminate Juche ideology, arguing that rather than fostering critical engagement and discussion, these centers operated as ideological export hubs reinforcing the cult of personality surrounding Kim Il Sung. The conclusion evaluates the broader significance of these institutions in shaping North Korea's public diplomacy and nation branding strategies during the Cold War.

“Juche” in North Korea’s Foreign Policy during the Cold War

In many postcolonial states, state ideology has functioned as a framework for nation-building and national development, primarily targeting domestic audiences who are expected to devote themselves to the reconstruction of the nation. Juche, which was first invoked in 1955 in reference to appropriate attitudes toward Soviet influence and technology, was later designated as the official state ideology and guiding principle of North Korea in the Socialist Constitution of 1972. Article 4 of the 1972 Socialist Constitution writes,

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is guided in its activity by the Juche Ideology of the Workers’ Party of Korea, a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the conditions of our country.¹³⁾

This constitution also confirmed Kim Il Sung’s monolithic leadership and the state’s ownership of the means of production. In other words, Juche ideology became not only the guiding principle for North Koreans but also the ideological foundation supporting Kim Il Sung’s leadership.

Indeed, scholars have pointed out that Juche ideology has functioned as an essential instrument for justifying the monolithic leadership of Kim Il Sung, and later Kim Jong Il, since the ideology was reportedly created by Kim Il Sung himself and positioned as the most appropriate framework for the North Korean people.¹⁴⁾ After being officially designated as successor to his father in 1980, Kim Jong Il further consolidated this ideological lineage by publishing *On the Juche Idea*,¹⁵⁾ later recognized as the only authoritative interpretation of the

13) Democratic People’s Republic of Korea [DPRK], *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea* (1972).

14) Young Chul Chung, *Kim Jong Il Leadership Studies* [김정일 리더십 연구] (Sönin, 2005), 378-81 [in Korean].

ideology. In this sense, Juche has been instrumentalized by successive North Korean leaders to claim that their rule is essential and inevitable for ensuring the nation's independence and development.

The origins of the term “Juche” can be traced to Kim Il Sung’s 1955 speech, “On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work,” in which he criticized party cadres for “mechanically copying the forms and methods of the Soviet Union” rather than adapting them creatively to local conditions.¹⁶⁾ In this context, Juche initially referred to a mindset of ideological autonomy, a call for reducing dependence on Soviet and Chinese aid and asserting greater national agency. The timing was critical: North Korea was about to launch its First Five-Year Plan in 1956, following the post-Korean War reconstruction period of 1953-1955. Kim Il Sung’s emphasis on Juche reflected his vision of a self-reliant economy centered on heavy industry and mass mobilization, rather than integration into the Soviet-led socialist division of labor.

Historians argue that the *de facto* origins of Juche can be traced back to North Korea’s anti-Japanese armed struggle in the 1930s. Gwang-Oon Kim emphasizes that North Korea’s experiences of anti-colonial resistance against Japan and its postcolonial struggle with Soviet influence are essential to understanding the ideological development of Juche. He describes it as a “guiding principle that defines North Korea as independent of outside pressures, insistent on its own ways, and master of its own fate”.¹⁷⁾ This interpretation is echoed in official North Korean ideological discourse, particularly in an article by Hwang Jang-yop published in the April 1982 issue of *Kulloja*, a monthly theoretical journal of the Workers’ Party of Korea.¹⁸⁾ He claimed,

Kim Il Sung, through his struggle to overcome the inherent weaknesses of the nationalist and early communist movement [of the 1920s], discovered a new fundamental revolutionary principle—that the masses are the masters of the revolution and the driving force behind it. On this basis, he developed an original revolutionary line that emphasized carrying out the Korean revolution creatively and independently.¹⁹⁾

Given that Kim Il Sung was born in 1912, this account is clearly exaggerated, if not mythologized. Nonetheless, such narratives point to the regime’s effort to root both Kim Il Sung’s legitimacy and the origins of Juche in the period of anti-Japanese armed struggle. It

15) Kim Jong Il, *On the Juche Idea* [주체사상에 대하여] (Workers’ Party of Korea Publishing House, 1982) [in Korean].

16) Kim Il Sung, *Kim Il Sung Works 9* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1982), 411.

17) Gwang-Oon Kim, “The Making of the Juche State in Postcolonial North Korea,” in *Origins of North Korea’s Juche: Colonialism, War, and Development*, ed. Jae-Jung Suh (Lexington Books, 2013), 64.

18) At the time, Hwang was serving as Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People’s Assembly, the *de facto* head of state, before later defecting to South Korea in 1997.

19) Hwang Jang-yop, “The Historical Position and Characteristics of the Juche Idea” [주체사상의 역사적지위와 특징], *Kulloja*, no. 4 (1982): 14 [in Korean].

was a rhetorical strategy that would prove equally significant in North Korea's outreach to postcolonial nations, from whom anti-colonial resistance carried symbolic resonance.

B. R. Myers offers a provocative interpretation of this ideological construction. He argues that Juche is best understood not as a coherent philosophical system but as a front-stage ideology, a carefully constructed rhetoric designed to make North Korea's radical nationalism palatable to external audiences. In his view, the transition from Marxism-Leninism to Juche in the early 1970s was a deliberate rebranding exercise: "the front-stage ideology change in the early 1970s from bloc-conform Marxism-Leninism into the people-first uplift of Juche, the relationship of which to communism had to be kept uninterpretable."²⁰) His framework captures an important dimension of North Korea's Juche-based nation branding, namely its calculated management of ideological messaging for different audiences. Still, as the following sections demonstrate, his account highlights the perspective of the sender over that of the receiver, leaving the question of how African audiences engaged with Juche unanswered.

While Juche shares its ideological roots with Marxism-Leninism, it gradually evolved into a distinct ideological system centered on human agency and national self-determination. Although the Socialist Constitution of 1972 acknowledges that Juche ideology is a "creative application" of Marxism-Leninism,²¹) subsequent interpretations increasingly emphasized the originality of Kim Il Sung's thought and the ideological independence of Juche from Soviet and Chinese models. North Korean theory argues that the most significant departure from classical Marxist thought lies in Juche's emphasis on human subjectivity. Rather than viewing individuals solely as members of a class engaged in historical material struggle, Juche locates human beings as autonomous agents who shape their own fate. As Kim Jong Il later defined, the Juche Idea is "based on the philosophical principle that man is the master of everything and decides everything".²²) This definition illustrates how North Korean leaders instrumentalized Juche as both a philosophical and political tool to mobilize the population for national development and socialist transformation.

Nonetheless, Juche was not merely an attitude or an ideological principle for North Korean population or the cadres of the Workers' Party of Korea. Juche gained increased prominence in North Korea's foreign policy when Kim Il Sung explicitly referred to it as a core element of state ideology during his visit to Indonesia in 1965. In a speech delivered during the visit, he declared,

While resolutely fighting in defense of the purity of Marxism-Leninism against revisionism, our Party has made every effort to establish Juche in opposition to dogmatism and flunkeyism

20) Brian Reynolds Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth* (Sthele Press, 2015), 5.

21) DPRK, *Socialist Constitution*.

22) Kim Jong Il, *On the Juche Idea*, 9-14.

towards great powers. Juche in ideology, independence in politics, self-support in the economy, and self-reliance in national defence—this is the stand our Party has consistently adhered to.²³⁾

Although the related principles of independence (*jaju*), self-support (*jarip*), and self-reliance (*jawi*) had already been present in North Korean discourse, this marked the first time that Juche was formally presented as an overarching ideological framework encompassing these elements. The timing was also significant: this was Kim Il Sung's first visit to a group of non-aligned and postcolonial countries outside of the Soviet Union, China, and the Eastern Bloc.²⁴⁾ From this point forward, Juche began to function not merely as a domestic ideological principle but a nation brand, a carefully packaged set of symbols and values projected outward to construct North Korea's image as an anti-imperialist, self-reliant revolutionary state for international audiences. Kim Il Sung's 1965 speech can therefore be read not only as a foreign policy statement but as a founding moment in North Korea's nation branding strategy.

The 1965 articulation of Juche as an ideological foundation occurred at a pivotal moment in North Korea's foreign policy. In the early 1960s, policymakers in Pyongyang found themselves navigating the escalating Sino-Soviet split, as their two principal socialist neighbors advanced competing visions of world revolution. North Korea initially aligned more closely with Maoist China, resisting Khrushchev's calls to join the COMECON and the Soviet-led socialist division of labor.²⁵⁾ Nonetheless, Pyongyang gradually distanced itself from both Beijing and Moscow, prompted in part by China's hesitance to intervene militarily in the Vietnam War and by the emergence of the Cultural Revolution, which Kim Il Sung viewed with caution.²⁶⁾ Amid growing tensions between the two socialist powers, Kim Il Sung increasingly emphasized the principle of self-reliance during his speech in December 1961, reflecting concerns about the risks of political and economic dependency.²⁷⁾

In this context, North Korea began to pursue an alternative foreign policy path, one that prioritized outreach to newly independent nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Kim Il Sung's visit to Indonesia, a key leader of the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, was a deliberate step toward building solidarity with postcolonial states. As North Korea sought to distinguish its brand of socialism from both Soviet and Chinese models,

23) Kim Il Sung, *Kim Il Sung Works 19* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1984), 263.

24) Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader*, 23.

25) Ahreum Park, "Analysis of Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Departure from the 'International Socialist Division of Labor' in 1962" [1962년 북한의 '사회주의 국제분업' 이탈 분석], *Critical Studies on Modern Korean History* 45 (2021): 457 [in Korean], <http://dx.doi.org/10.36432/CSMKH.45.202104.11>.

26) Ryu, "Between Second and Third World," 365-66.

27) Soo-Ryong Jo, *Jaryeokgaengsaeng Economy: North Korea's Socialist Transition and Its Formation* [전후 북한의 사회주의 이행과 '자력갱생' 경제의 형성] (doctoral dissertation, Department of History, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, South Korea, 2018), 243 [in Korean].

Juche offered a peculiar ideological package: its emphasis on anti-imperialism and self-reliance spoke directly to the experiences of newly decolonized nations. Its deliberate distance from Moscow and Beijing allowed Pyongyang to present itself as an independent, non-aligned revolutionary actor. This marked the beginning of North Korea's nation branding efforts in Africa, a process through which Juche was transformed from a domestic ideological principle into a symbolic brand designed to resonate with African audiences navigating their own postcolonial trajectories.

Friendship Association: Institution of Illiberal Nation Branding?

Among the earliest and most active institutions established by North Korea to strengthen ties with African countries were friendship associations. During the Cold War, such organizations served as vehicles for cultural diplomacy and grassroots engagement within the socialist world. North Korea appears to have modeled its associations after earlier institutions in the Soviet Union and China.²⁸⁾ In the Soviet case, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), founded in 1925, promoted international exchange among intellectuals and artists and later evolved into the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in 1958.²⁹⁾ Pyongyang deployed friendship associations not merely to promote culture, but to project an image of militant fighters that survived “imperialist invasion,” cultivate anti-imperialist alliances, and legitimize its leadership abroad. In Gienow-Hecht's terms, this was an attempt to “craft, enhance, or improve the reputation of a state,” one that this article characterizes as illiberal nation branding, insofar as it relied on top-down approach rather than public engagement.

Tracing the concrete activities of all North Korean friendship associations, which were established in many countries with diplomatic relations, is almost impossible due to the limited available records. Researchers must often rely on state-run newspaper reports to reconstruct key events such as establishment ceremonies, photo exhibitions, or film screenings organized by friendship associations. One such event was the official launch of the Korea-Africa Friendship Association on December 21, 1965, held at the Chollima Cultural House in central Pyongyang.³⁰⁾ The ceremony was attended by high-ranking North Korean officials involved in foreign affairs and cultural diplomacy. Jon Byong Chol, Vice Chairman of the

28) Sunghye Kim, “Pyongyang, the Center of Socialism: North Korea's Initiative to Translate Korean Texts into Foreign Languages,” *Acta Koreana* 26, no. 1 (2023): 160-68, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/900703>

29) Jean-François Fayet, “VOKS: The Third Dimension of Soviet Foreign Policy,” in *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, ed. Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried (Berghahn Books, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781845459949-005>

30) “The Bonds of Friendship between the Korean and African Peoples Will Be Strengthened and Developed in the Path of Anti-Imperialist Struggle: Founding Meeting of the Korea-Africa Friendship Association Held” [조선 인민과 아프리카 인민들간의 친선적 뉴대는 반제 투쟁의 한길에서 강화 발전될 것이다: 조선-아프리카 친선 협회 창립 대회 진행], *Rodong Sinmun*, December 22, 1965, 3 [in Korean].

Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, declared that the association would “advance friendship and cultural exchange between the Korean and African peoples,” emphasizing the shared struggle “against imperialist aggressors”. This statement exemplifies the ideological framing that Pyongyang consistently employed: geographic distance was rhetorically collapsed through the language of anti-imperialism, constructing “imagined affinities” that positioned North Korea as a legitimate partner in the postcolonial world.³¹⁾

Despite its stated goal of fostering friendship and cultural exchange with African nations, North Korean media coverage of the Korea-Africa Friendship Association’s launch made no mention of any African participants. Given Pyongyang’s consistent practice of showcasing foreign dignitaries in domestic press, this omission strongly suggests that no African representatives were present. In this light, the event appears less a moment of bilateral engagement and more a performative gesture—designed primarily for a domestic audience, signaling North Korea’s readiness to engage decolonized African countries. The launch of Korea-Africa Friendship Association therefore aligned with broader efforts to position Pyongyang as a vanguard of anti-imperialist solidarity in the midst of the US-Soviet competition and the Sino-Soviet Split. The establishment of the association was indeed a branding exercise directed as much inward as outward.

Nonetheless, not all friendship associations were established merely as performative and symbolic gestures. North Korea’s engagement with Tanzania went considerably further. The establishment of the Korea-Tanzania Friendship Association in November 1969 marked a deepening of bilateral ties and provided a gateway for broader engagement with the African continent. In Pyongyang’s foreign policy toward the non-aligned countries, Tanzania held particular strategic value. President Julius Nyerere, a leading proponent of African Socialism, emerged as a central figure in sub-Saharan African politics after the 1966 coup that ousted Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah. Although skeptical of Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanist vision, Nyerere embraced a pragmatic, anti-colonial solidarity.³²⁾ Under his leadership, Tanzania became a sanctuary for liberation movements, with Dar es Salaam serving as what Eric Burton has termed a “hub of decolonization”.³³⁾ Nyerere’s commitment drew widespread international attention, with many international media outlets based in the capital to cover the unfolding anti-colonial struggles across the continent.³⁴⁾ For Pyongyang, securing Tanzania’s support was therefore of strategic diplomatic importance, as it signaled credibility and

31) Ryu, “Between Second and Third World.”

32) Paul Bjerk, “Postcolonial Realism: Tanganyika’s Foreign Policy Under Nyerere, 1960–1963,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 246, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23046879>

33) Eric Burton, “Hubs of Decolonization: African Liberation Movements and ‘Eastern’ Connections in Cairo, Accra, and Dar es Salaam,” in *Southern African Liberation Movements and the Global Cold War ‘East’: Transnational Activism 1960-1990*, ed. Lena Dallywater, Chris Saunders, and Helder Adegas Fonseca (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019).

34) George Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961-1974* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

influence within the broader Third World. Julius Nyerere's first visit to Pyongyang in June 1968 added further significance of Tanzania for North Korea, since the latter could demonstrate its prestige to domestic and international audience, being recognized by another prominent leader of the decolonized world.³⁵⁾

One year after Nyerere's visit to Pyongyang, North Korea and Tanzania formalized their growing partnership by establishing the Korea-Tanzania Friendship Association, with the goal of facilitating more active and frequent cultural exchange.³⁶⁾ The inaugural meeting took place on November 21, 1969, at the Chollima House of Culture and was attended by several high-ranking officials: Yang Hyong Sop, Minister of Higher Education; Kim Gwan Sop, Acting Chair of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries; and Salim Ahmed Salim, Tanzania's ambassador to China and North Korea. The presence of such senior figures indicates that this friendship association was a state-sponsored and centrally managed organization. Rather than serving as a space for autonomous people-to-people interaction, it was closely aligned with the official policies and ideological goals of both governments.

The speeches delivered by Kim Gwan Sop and Salim Ahmed Salim at the inauguration reflected this ideological orientation. Kim praised Tanzania's postcolonial development efforts and emphasized the two nations' shared opposition to imperialism, particularly that of the United States. He also invoked North Korea's own anti-colonial struggle against Japan and the United States under Kim Il Sung's leadership, framing the bilateral relationship as a joint front in the global struggle against imperialist aggression. Salim echoed these sentiments, applauding North Korea's resilience and revolutionary resolve. While neither speaker outlined specific plans for the friendship association's programming, their remarks repeatedly invoked a narrative of militant solidarity grounded in common historical experiences. This discourse closely mirrored the rhetoric employed during Nyerere's 1968 visit, suggesting that cultural exchange under this organization would serve to reinforce, rather than diversify, the official ideological messages of anti-imperialism.³⁷⁾ From a nation branding perspective, the inauguration functioned less as the launch of a genuine exchange program and more as a carefully staged performance. Both North Korean and Tanzanian governments projected their shared anti-imperialist credentials to domestic and international audiences alike.

The list of officials who participated in the launching event illustrates the symbolic and diplomatic significance North Korea placed on the organization. The presence of Salim Ahmed Salim as keynote speaker, unlike the conspicuous absence of any African participants at the Korea-Africa Friendship Association's launch four years earlier, suggests that Tanzania also regarded the association with some degree of seriousness. This distinction is analytically

35) "Envoy of Friendship, a Valuable Guest" [친선의 사절, 귀중한 손님], *Rodong Sinmun*, June 22, 1968, 1 [in Korean].

36) "Korea-Tanzania Friendship Association Inaugurated," *The Pyongyang Times*, December 1, 1969, 11.

37) Ryu, "Between Second and Third World," 374.

significant: it points to a gradual development in North Korea's nation branding strategy, from a purely performative gesture directed at a domestic audience toward a more genuinely bilateral form of engagement, however limited.

Yet evidence from external sources complicates this narrative. A British diplomatic report written by C. T. Hart offers a behind-the-scenes account of the Tanzania-Korea Friendship Society, inaugurated in Dar es Salaam on April 2, 1970, five months after the Korea-Tanzania Friendship Association launched in Pyongyang.³⁸⁾ According to Hart, North Korea quickly mobilized this Tanzanian counterpart organization to advance its ideological messaging, instructing local members to translate Kim Il Sung's writings from English into Swahili. As Swahili was the official language in Tanzania, the translated works were expected to further disseminate North Korea's achievements and goals in global anti-imperialist struggle to the Tanzanian public. This directive reportedly frustrated some Tanzanian participants, who perceived it as overly propagandistic. Hart also recorded local bewilderment over North Korea's denial of the Apollo 11 moon landing, an episode that, for many, revealed the regime's ideological rigidity. It should be noted that British diplomatic correspondence carries its own biases: Hart's report reflects the perspective of Western observer with little familiarity with North Korean ideology or foreign relations, and his characterization of Tanzanian reactions may not fully capture the range of local responses. Direct Tanzanian archival sources that would allow a more complete reconstruction of local reception remain difficult to access.³⁹⁾ Nevertheless, Hart's account offers valuable insight, hinting at the gap between North Korea's branding efforts and their reception on the ground, which cannot be confirmed from North Korean sources alone.

Although Hart does not speculate on Pyongyang's motivations, one can infer that these public diplomacy efforts were part of a broader follow-up campaign after Nyerere's 1968 visit. These exchanges reveal both the ambition and the limitations of North Korea's attempt to construct friendship through state-sponsored organizations. While Juche was indirectly instrumentalized through the message of anti-imperialism and the translated works of Kim Il Sung to appeal to local actors, Tanzanians at times negotiated, appropriated, or resisted these efforts.

This report reveals that not all members of the Tanzania-Korea Friendship Society were fully committed to deepening inter-state relations. While North Korean officials were eager to disseminate Swahili translations of Kim Il Sung's writings, their expectations were not always met on the ground. For instance, Peter Msungu, the society's secretary, was tasked with

38) The National Archives (UKNA), "Correspondence Files from C. T. Hart to Mrs. M. Bryan: Relations between North Korea and Tanzania," September 28, 1970, FCO 95/860, *Tanzania: Relations with North Korea, 1970*, Kew, United Kingdom.

39) Paul Bjerk, "Archives and Historical Sources for Tanzania," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, African History* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.125>.

translating articles from *The Pyongyang Times* into Swahili. Instead of translating them himself, he subcontracted the work to friends while taking a commission, suggesting limited engagement with the political content of North Korean materials, if not outright disinterest.⁴⁰⁾ Still, such actions do not necessarily signal the failure of North Korea's public diplomacy. Rather, they reveal the disjunctions and informalities that can emerge in state-sponsored exchanges where individual actors operate with a degree of autonomy. This incident is better understood as structural problems of illiberal nation branding and public diplomacy. In regimes where ideological conformity is paramount, public diplomacy tends to become more performative than genuine dialogue and projected solidarity.

The friendship associations' mission to translate Kim Il Sung's speeches and writings is closely connected to Pyongyang's attempt to reach the Tanzanian public. North Koreans used Tanzanian newspapers to promote their leader and achievements of rapid industrialization. The translated works were published as paid advertisement in local newspapers. As Benjamin R. Young argues, these ads aimed to "raise the international stature of Kim Il Sung as a leading revolutionary theorist and promote pro-DPRK sympathies among leaderships in the Third World".⁴¹⁾ While this interpretation captures the core message, the ads also reflect Pyongyang's attempt to reach a broader Tanzanian public, especially those with limited English proficiency and less direct familiarity with North Korea. In contrast to English-language papers like *The Nationalist* and *The Standard*, Swahili-language outlets such as *Ngurumo* and *Mfanya Kazi* became key vehicles for disseminating North Korean narratives. North Korea provided financial support in exchange for full-page advertisements or editorials praising Kim Il Sung's accomplishments. In the case of *Ngurumo*, the newspaper had begun relying on North Korean funds amid financial hardship in the late 1960s.⁴²⁾

North Korea's translation and publication strategies were not unique, as many socialist countries employed similar methods to spread their ideologies across the Global South. Drawing from earlier experiences with the Korea-Soviet Cultural Association since the 1940s, which had translated works like Lenin's biography and Engels's monographs, North Korean officials deployed these tactics to reach Tanzanian readers through Swahili-language newspapers.⁴³⁾ These efforts did not stop at the border: articles from *Ngurumo* and *Mfanya Kazi* were selectively reprinted in *Rodong Sinmun* and *The Pyongyang Times*, edited to suggest that Kim Il Sung's speeches had received prominent front-page coverage abroad. This editorial adjustment aimed to convince domestic audiences that their leader was a well-known

40) The National Archives, "Relations between North Korea and Tanzania," FCO 95/860.

41) Benjamin R. Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World* (Stanford University Press, 2021), 53.

42) George Roberts, "The Rise and Fall of a Swahili Tabloid in Socialist Tanzania: *Ngurumo* Newspaper, 1959-76," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 17, nos. 1-2 (2023): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2023.2246762>.

43) Kim, "Pyongyang, the Center of Socialism," 157.

revolutionary figure on the global stage, thereby reinforcing his legitimacy at home. As Young notes, such efforts may have genuinely persuaded North Korean readers of Kim's global status.⁴⁴⁾

Still, Young's broader conclusion that these initiatives failed to strengthen ties with postcolonial nations deserves closer examination. He contends that excessive anti-US elements in North Korea's cultural diplomacy flabbergasted the Third World officials and Western diplomats, as they regarded Pyongyang's propaganda as a potential threat to their own external relations.⁴⁵⁾ Yet, as this article has shown, anti-imperialist rhetoric, which indirectly delivered the message of Juche, was precisely the narrative that resonated with Tanzania during the formative years of bilateral engagement. Fighting against dependence on imperialist power was a core component of North Korea's brand of Juche and its appeal to decolonized African nations. Moreover, many scholarly assessments rely on Western diplomatic correspondence that fails to capture how African publics perceived these cultural exchanges. As Jessica Gienow-Hecht observes, the elusive nature of audience perception makes it inherently difficult to assess the success of public diplomacy.⁴⁶⁾ In the case of North Korea and Tanzania, one simply does not know how participants in friendship associations understood or internalized Juche ideology and its anti-imperialist discourse.

Regardless of whether friendship associations led to the success or failure of North Korea's public diplomacy, it is clear that the country managed to enhance its international prestige in some postcolonial nations during this period. Some records even suggest that North Korea succeeded in creating a positive image of itself in the Global South.⁴⁷⁾ In particular, these associations allowed Pyongyang to continue cooperation with Tanzania when the latter faced political and financial difficulties. While North Korea did not maintain the same level of collaboration with every African country, its shared vision of an anti-imperialist world order and self-reliant development laid the groundwork for more concrete and practical forms of cooperation in the following decade, particularly in the agricultural sector, where both countries would collaborate intensively in the 1970s and 1980s. Viewed through the lens of nation branding, the friendship associations served multiple functions: while practicing performative spectacle, they were also functioned as genuine diplomatic tools. Their limitations, particularly the top-down nature of their messaging, were structural features of illiberal nation branding. In spite of this constraint, they created the symbolic and institutional conditions that made deeper bilateral engagement possible.

44) Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader*, 59.

45) *Ibid.*, 60.

46) Gienow-Hecht, "The World Is Ready to Listen," 18.

47) *Politische Beziehungen Nordkoreas zu dritter Staaten, 1958–1965*, n.d., B 44, IIA8 15, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin, Germany.

Juche Study Center: Exporting Hubs of North Korean Ideology

While friendship associations were intended as institutions to promote intercultural communication between North Korea and African countries, Pyongyang established another type of organization aimed specifically at disseminating its Juche ideology. As discussed earlier, Kim Il Sung initially introduced Juche in the 1950s as an attitude and mindset. In the following decade, however, Juche evolved into a core component of North Korea's state ideology, alongside the principles of independence in politics, self-support in the economy, and self-reliance in national defense. Although Kim Il Sung frequently emphasized anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism during meetings with African leaders to foster ideological affinity, some foreign leaders directly expressed interest in Juche itself, noting similarities between its tenets and their own ideologies and governing principles.⁴⁸⁾

During the 1970s, Pyongyang made concerted efforts to cultivate a positive international image and expand diplomatic relations with both Western and non-aligned countries. Following the replacement of the Republic of China (Taiwan) by the People's Republic of China at the United Nations in 1971, North Korea increasingly recognized the strategic importance of securing membership and influence within international organizations.⁴⁹⁾ Juche ideology was not merely deployed to persuade African leaders to support pro-North Korean resolutions at the UN General Assembly but also served as a means of engaging African publics who were interested in alternative models of postcolonial development. By emphasizing principles such as self-reliance and national sovereignty, Juche offered a resonant political vocabulary that allowed Pyongyang to connect with local audiences beyond the formal bounds of diplomacy.

Recognizing the importance of cultivating a positive image among international audiences, North Korea sought to promote Juche by establishing ideological institutions abroad. These organizations, later formalized as Juche Study Centers, functioned as instruments of public diplomacy, designed to disseminate North Korea's narratives of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle, rapid industrialization, and the greatness of its leadership to audiences across the Third World. The institutionalization of Juche as North Korea's official ideology also facilitated diplomatic outreach to non-aligned countries. Its emphasis on self-reliance resonated with the political and economic philosophies of various liberation movements that prioritized sovereignty and autonomy. In this context, Juche functioned as nation branding that enabled North Korea to forge ties with decolonized African nations, presenting ideological affinity as a foundation for international cooperation. By acknowledging Kim Il Sung's leadership and endorsing the principle of Juche, these countries could, in turn, benefit from North Korean developmental assistance and military support.

48) Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader*, 80.

49) Jong-Dae Shin, "Inter-Korean Diplomatic Competition and the June 23 Declaration" [남북한 외교경쟁과 '6.23선언'], *Review of North Korean Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 205 [in Korean], <http://dx.doi.org/10.17321/rnks.2019.22.3.006>.

One of North Korea's key rationales for the global diffusion of Juche ideology is the existence of numerous Juche Study Centers around the world. Along with friendship associations, these centers were tasked with translating the speeches and writings of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, publishing them in local languages, and promoting study of the North Korean ideology among international audiences. Among what North Korea refers to as “activities for the dissemination and propagation of Juche thought,” the formation of Juche study organizations is considered a central element.⁵⁰⁾ Some of these organizations remain active today and trace their origins to the first group founded in Bamako, Mali in April 1969.⁵¹⁾ From this initial base, such groups quickly expanded across Africa and other regions of the non-aligned countries. Notably, these groups were not limited to individual countries. In some cases, they operated across multiple regions within a country or at the continental level. For example, in February 1978, the Latin American Institute of the Juche Idea was established as the first regional-level organization, followed by the formation of the Asian Institute in September 1980, and the African Institute in April 1985, both of which oversaw activities on their respective continents.⁵²⁾

Most of these study groups operated as subordinate branches of the International Institute of the Juche Idea (IIJI), which was established in Tokyo on April 9, 1978.⁵³⁾ While North Korean sources claim that these organizations were formed through the voluntary participation of local citizens and intellectuals, the structure of these institutions also reveals a clear top-down hierarchy. North Korean publications describe this as a “systematic structure” in which the IIJI is linked both horizontally and vertically to regional and continental committees, national committees, local committees, and grassroots study groups—an embodiment of the Juche principle of monolithic unity.

Benjamin R. Young argues that Pyongyang instrumentalized Juche as its propaganda apparatus, since the concept was introduced as “Kim Il Sung’s own creation and personal contribution to Marxist-Leninist theory”.⁵⁴⁾ Indeed, Juche served as a strategic tool for North Korea to assert ideological independence from the Soviet Union and China, while elevating Kim Il Sung as a leader of the global anti-imperialist movement. It also bolstered Pyongyang’s international status in its longstanding rivalry with South Korea, an ideological and diplomatic competition that persisted until both states were admitted to the UN in 1991. North Korean

50) J. Kim, “Main Characteristics of the Deepening and Development of Juche Ideology Dissemination Activities on a Global Scale” [세계적범위에서 심화발전되고있는 주체사상연구보급활동의 주요특징], *Chŏngch'i Pŏmnyul Yŏn'gu* [Political and Legal Studies], no. 1 (2004) [in Korean].

51) Igor Dobrzeniecki, “Juche Ideology in Africa: Its Origins & Development,” *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia* 32 (2019): 126, <http://www.aav.iksiopan.pl/index.php/pl/component/content/article?id=835:juche-ideology-in-africa-its-origins-development#streszczenie>

52) J. Kim, “Main Characteristics of the Deepening and Development of Juche Ideology Dissemination Activities.”

53) Ibid.

54) Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader*, 79.

sources make ambitious claims about the global reach of Juche, asserting that unlike Marxism, which spread gradually from Europe to Asia over a considerable period of time, Juche ideology has been propagated across a far wider range of countries in a much shorter period, capturing “the hearts of hundreds of millions of people”.⁵⁵⁾ Such claims must be treated with considerable caution. As with much of North Korea’s official discourse on Juche, they are prone to exaggeration and self-serving interpretation, and should be read less as empirical accounts of ideological diffusion and more as performative assertions of the regime’s global legitimacy, themselves as an expression of the nation branding strategy this article seeks to analyze.

For some postcolonial actors, Juche presented an appealing ideological framework, one that offered guidance on “how to organize a state and create a nation” in the wake of decolonization.⁵⁶⁾ Igor Dobrzeniecki similarly argues that Juche Study Groups, along with their meetings, institutes, conferences, and workshops, played an important role in disseminating Juche ideology in Africa.⁵⁷⁾ He further contends, however, that these groups disseminated propaganda “simply in order to gain more admirers,” a conclusion that echoed in part by Van der Hoog, who finds little evidence of “genuine collaboration between North Korean and African intellectuals in the pursuit of Juche thought,” despite African participants’ aspirations to learn about the ideology.⁵⁸⁾ Myers, too, implies that African engagement with Juche was largely a product of North Korean manipulation, viewing it as a rebranded term designed to obscure its ideological origins and accumulate foreign sympathizers.⁵⁹⁾

These assessments capture an important dimension of how Juche Study Centers functioned, but they share a common limitation: they privilege the perspective of sender, North Korean leadership, over that of the receiver, African audiences, and thus leave underexplored the question of how African audiences actually engaged with Juche on their own terms. The Tanzanian evidence complicates this “admirers only” argument in two important respects.

First, African participants appear to have been drawn not to Juche’s divergence from Marxism-Leninism, but to its emphasis on self-reliance and anti-imperialism, principles that resonated with their own political traditions and postcolonial experiences. In the Tanzanian case, Juche did not compete with or replace Ujamaa, Julius Nyerere’s philosophy of African Socialism. Rather, it functioned as a complementary framework, reinforcing existing commitments to national sovereignty and self-reliant development, and thereby strengthening the sense of ideological affinity between the two states.

55) J. Kim, “Main Characteristics of the Deepening and Development of Juche Ideology Dissemination Activities.”

56) Tycho van der Hoog, “Microphone Revolution: North Korean Cultural Diplomacy during the Liberation of Southern Africa,” in *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism*, ed. Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis (Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 278.

57) Dobrzeniecki, “Juche Ideology in Africa,” 126.

58) Ibid., 127; van der Hoog, “Microphone Revolution,” 280.

59) Myers, *North Korea’s Juche Myth*, 5.

Second, the geographical distribution of Juche Study Groups in Tanzania suggests that ideological dissemination and practical cooperation were deliberately coordinated. Dobrzeniecki notes that Tanzania remains one of the countries, along with Nigeria and Uganda, where Juche Study Groups are most active, with thirteen groups located in Dar es Salaam and additional groups in Morogoro and Coast regions.⁶⁰⁾ This geographical detail is analytically significant: North Korea operated the Chollima Agricultural Research Institute in Dakawa, Morogoro region in the 1980s, dispatching approximately one hundred scientists and engineers to collaborate with Tanzanian farmers on agricultural development.⁶¹⁾ The presence of a Juche Study Center in the same region is unlikely to be coincidental. Rather, it suggests that Juche Study Centers did not operate in isolation from North Korea's broader engagement with Tanzania, but were embedded within a wider network of cultural, diplomatic, and developmental activities. It points to the presence of a coherent nation branding strategy that combined ideological affinity with material cooperation on the ground.

North Korean newspaper reports on Juche Study seminars reveal that the activities of Juche Study Centers were dominated not by critical engagement with the ideology but by praise for Kim Il Sung and North Korea's achievements. A particularly illustrative example is a letter sent on December 25, 1979, by I. S. Mushi, the head of the Tanzania Juche Study Group, to Kim Il Sung. According to the letter, the group had organized a seminar to study his speech on December 25, 1972, titled "Let us Further Strengthen the Socialist System of Our Country".⁶²⁾ Mushi reported that the participants were "pleased to realize that the questions raised in your work contain universal truths which all the governments in the world should take as guidelines in their activities," concluding that "the guiding line of all these truths is the Juche Ideology." According to *Rodong Sinmun*, a portrait of Kim Il Sung was prominently displayed at the front of the seminar hall.⁶³⁾ This detail reinforces the impression that these so-called seminars functioned less as spaces for open intellectual discussion and more as ritualistic forums for the glorification of Kim Il Sung and the ideological orthodoxy of Juche. While framed as academic inquiry, such events likely served as carefully orchestrated exercises in political education, where Kim's portrait took precedence over critical thought. This episode illustrates how public diplomacy was unfolded in Juche Study Centers, which had characteristics as ceremonial platforms for affirming North Korea's political mythology rather than as sites of critical ideological engagement.

These institutions appear to have continued their activities even after the end of the Cold

60) Dobrzeniecki, "Juche Ideology in Africa," 132.

61) "DPRK Irrigation Experts Coming," *Daily News*, September 10, 1981, 1.

62) "Seminar on the Immortal Classic Work of the Great Leader" [위대한 수령님의 불후의 고전적로작에 대한 연구토론회], *Rodong Sinmun*, February 4, 1980, 2 [in Korean].

63) "To the Beloved Leader, President Kim Il Sung" [경애하는 수령이신 김일성주석각하께], *Rodong Sinmun*, February 4, 1980, 2 [in Korean].

War. Although it remains difficult to assess the actual size or influence of each organization, their operations are still regularly reported in North Korea's state newspapers. In October 2007, for instance, a regional Juche ideology symposium was held in Dar es Salaam, bringing together members of the African Regional Committee for the Study of Juche Idea as well as representatives from affiliated organizations in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Guinea, Egypt, and Tanzania.⁶⁴⁾ Participants praised not only Juche ideology but also the *Songun* (military-first) ideology championed by Kim Jong Il, describing it as “a great idea that can reliably safeguard the dignity and security of any nation”. They argued that it offered an effective strategy for achieving genuine independence, defending national sovereignty, and resisting the pressures of globalization. In 2013, following Kim Jong Un's rise to power, another African regional symposium was held in Kampala, Uganda, under the theme “Juche Ideology and Lessons for Africa's Independent Transformation”.⁶⁵⁾ At the event, participants declared that North Korea's “astonishing achievements” in building a strong and prosperous state, including its successful launch of artificial satellites and its emergence as a nuclear-armed country, were the direct result of Kim Jong Un's “exceptional leadership”, and a testament to the enduring power of Juche ideology and *Songun* policy. These recent events suggest that the centers increasingly shifted their emphasis toward justifying North Korea's authoritarian regime and its military-first policy, rather than fostering genuine engagement with Juche ideology or building substantive ties with the Global South.

Whether the activities of Juche Study Centers can be considered examples of public diplomacy or nation branding is debatable. While it is true that these centers hosted events in which local residents and intellectuals could engage with North Korea's worldview, the tightly controlled environment left little room for critical dialogue. It remains unclear to what extent participants left with a favorable image of North Korea, especially given the absence of open debate or reciprocal exchange. Like friendship associations that operated without actual “friends”, Juche Study Centers functioned as instruments of illiberal nation branding. These were not platforms for mutual understanding but vehicles through which the North Korean state selectively invited foreign audiences and promoted its ideology on non-negotiable terms. Participation was often conditioned on the willingness to engage with North Korea as a model of anti-imperialist resistance and postcolonial development. And yet, as the Tanzanian case has demonstrated, this does not mean that African participants were merely passive participants of North Korean propaganda. While Juche's core messages aligned with existing local

64) “Tanzania Hosts African Regional Juche Ideology Symposium” [탄자니아에서 아프리카지역 주체사상토론회 진행], *Minju Choson*, October 23, 2007, 1 [in Korean].

65) “African Regional Symposium on Juche Ideology and Lessons for Africa's Independent Transformation Held in Uganda” [주체사상과 아프리카의 자주적변혁을 위한 교훈에 관한 아프리카지역토론회 우간다에서 진행], *Rodong Sinmun*, May 21, 2013, 6 [in Korean].

ideologies and practical cooperation on the ground, these centers could serve a genuine nation branding function, constructing a credible and positive image of North Korea that went beyond mere ideological performance.

The activities of Juche Study Centers were not solely intended to disseminate Juche ideology abroad. With few exceptions, these centers received more attention from North Korea's state and party-controlled media than from foreign audiences themselves. Newspapers such as *Rodong Sinmun* and *Minju Choson* extensively reported on the activities of Juche Study Centers abroad, often publishing full transcripts of conference presentations and speeches. Just as North Korean media reprinted translated excerpts of foreign newspapers that published speeches by Kim Il Sung, framing them as proof of his greatness and the legitimacy of the regime, the reporting on Juche Study Centers serve an equally domestic purpose: to signal to North Korean readers that Juche ideology was not merely imposed on the population, but was actively embraced by people around the world as a model of revolutionary struggle. In this sense, Juche, which had been repurposed as a tool of nation branding abroad, was once again reframed for a domestic audience as a reaffirmation of state ideology.

Conclusion

This article has examined how North Korea employed its state ideology of Juche to engage with African countries in the context of the Cold War and decolonization. Drawing on North Korean, British, German, and Tanzanian records, it demonstrated how Pyongyang established institutions such as friendship associations and Juche Study Centers to construct a favorable international image, particularly among foreign audiences in newly decolonized nations. Juche served as a core element of North Korea's nation branding: an ideology that encapsulated the regime's anti-colonial struggle, its critique of US imperialism, and its model of self-reliant postcolonial development. Far from being merely an inward-looking doctrine, Juche was actively instrumentalized for public diplomacy, especially in ties with African nations where ideological affinities could be cultivated. North Korea's deployment of Juche contributed to its pursuit of international legitimacy and solidarity with countries such as Tanzania and Uganda, which later supported Pyongyang's successful bid to join the Non-Aligned Movement in 1975 and challenge South Korea's diplomatic status at the United Nations.

This article's contribution lies in reframing these institutional histories through the lens of nation branding. Following Gienow-Hecht's definition of nation branding as the "attempt to control the image of a state or a region," this article has demonstrated that Juche functioned as precisely such an instrument. Where previous scholarship has approached Pyongyang's engagement with Africa primarily as a question of propaganda or diplomatic history, this article has shown

that Juche functioned as a domestic ideology and an internationally projected brand. Most importantly, African audiences were not merely passive recipients of North Korean messaging. Where Juche's core messages aligned with existing local ideologies, as in the case of Tanzania where Ujamaa and Juche reinforced, rather than marginalized each other, North Korean institutions could serve a genuine nation branding effort that went beyond mere ideological dissemination.

Still, whether the activities of friendship associations and Juche Study Centers could be regarded as genuine public diplomacy remains debatable. These institutions rarely facilitated grassroots exchanges or mutual understanding between people living in the two distant regions. Rather, they often operated through symbolic gestures and staged performances, promoting a cult of personality around Kim Il Sung that benefited a small elite group, typically high-ranking officials invited to ceremonial events. Such practices illustrate the structural limitations of illiberal nation branding, in which top-down spectacle and performative loyalty overshadowed opportunities for critical engagement or bilateral communication. In this sense, Juche Study Centers and friendship associations served multiple functions: partly diplomatic tool, partly ideological performance.

Nevertheless, North Korea's Juche-based initiatives did achieve some of their objectives in the 1970s and 1980s. Tanzania emerged as a key partner in North Korea's outreach to postcolonial Africa, owing to its influence within the NAM and its links to African liberation movements. During his visit to Pyongyang in June 1968, President Julius Nyerere praised North Korea's militant anti-imperialism and rapid agricultural development. The friendship associations established in both countries helped promote North Korea's developmental model among Tanzanian audiences, enabling Pyongyang to pursue agricultural cooperation in the midst of the chronic food shortage. North Korea demonstrated the competency of its agriculture by dispatching scientists and technicians to rural Tanzania, resulting in the establishment of the Chollima Agricultural Research Institute in 1982.⁶⁶) In other words, North Korea's instrumentalization of Juche fulfilled the core goal of nation branding as it "enabled people at home and abroad to view a state as legitimate and credible, thereby meriting their allegiance and support."⁶⁷)

In the 2020s, however, this branding strategy is undergoing significant transformation. Following years of border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea resumed

66) C-S. Rim, "The Struggle to Establish the African Agricultural Science Institute under the Wise Leadership of the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung" [위대한 수령 김일성동지의 현명한 령도밑에 아프리카농업과학연구소창설을 위한 투쟁], *Yöksa Kwahak [Historical Science]*, no. 2 (1998) [in Korean]; "[Photographs of Julius Nyerere Visiting the Opening Ceremony of the Chollima Agricultural Scientific Research Institute, Dakawa, Morogoro]," *Daily News*, May 13, 1985, 1.

67) Carolin Viktorin, Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner, and Marcel K. Will, "Introduction: Beyond Marketing and Diplomacy: Exploring the Historical Origins of Nation Branding," in *Nation Branding in Modern History*, ed. Carolin Viktorin, Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner, and Marcel K. Will (Berghahn Books, 2018), 2.

some of its conventional public diplomacy initiatives, including the International Seminar on the Juche Idea in 2024. Led by long-standing foreign sympathizers like Ogami Kenichi of Japan and Matteo Carbonelli of Italy, this event allowed the regime to assert the continued commitment to Juche and the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un's leadership.⁶⁸⁾ Yet such ideological messaging exists alongside a markedly different mode of nation branding. The grand opening of the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Zone, celebrated with the personal participation of Kim Jong Un, exemplifies this shift. *Rodong Sinmun* proclaimed that “hundreds of buildings with diverse and modern aesthetics harmonize with the scenic beauty of the coastal area long renowned for its splendid views”.⁶⁹⁾ This imagery, deliberately apolitical and oriented toward international tourism, signals a conscious move away from ideological branding toward the spectacle-based nation branding that Gienow-Hecht identifies among authoritarian states such as China, Russia, and Qatar, which have increasingly turned to mega-events and tourism to rebrand themselves as “normal” states”.⁷⁰⁾

In sum, North Korea's use of Juche for public diplomacy and nation branding proved most effective during the Cold War, when its rapid industrialization and anti-imperialist rhetoric appealed to other postcolonial leaders. The case of Tanzania illustrates both the achievements and limitations of this strategy: Juche provided a symbolic bridge that enabled concrete cooperation, yet the exchanges it generated remained shaped by the structural constraints of illiberal nation branding, more performative than communicative, and more top-down than reciprocal. As this article has argued, however, North Korea's nation branding depended not only on how it was projected by the leadership in Pyongyang, but also on how it was received, appropriated, and at times resisted or neglected by African audiences who brought their postcolonial experiences and political agendas to the encounter. As North Korea now experiments with new forms of nation branding that downplay ideological content in favor of imagery, the Cold War history examined in this article offers a crucial lesson: the interaction between state ideology and nation branding, as shown in the North Korean case, has always been carefully managed rather than merely performative.

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68) Joe Smith, “North Korea Lauds Event with Pro Regime Groups on Promoting ‘Juche Idea’,” *NK News*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.nknews.org/2024/04/north-korea-lauds-event-with-pro-regime-groups-on-promoting-juche-idea/>.

69) “A New Landscape of Socialist Civilization on the East Sea Coast” [사회주의문명개화의 새 경관을 펼친 동해기슭의 관광명소], *Rodong Sinmun*, June 26, 2025, 1 [in Korean].

70) Gienow-Hecht, *Vom Staat zur Marke*, 133-38.

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