

## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **U.S. Policy and Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea**

*Prepared statement Jinmyung Choi, North Korean Defector*

Hello, everyone. My name is Jinmyung. I escaped North Korea at the age of 17 after being arrested by the Ministry of State Security for listening to South Korean music, which made me impure in belief in the ideology. Currently, I am enrolled in Handong Global University as a legal studies major.

I want to share my experience of living in North Korea and its Juche ideology, and how it was difficult to tell ideological indoctrination from everyday life.

First, I want to tell you about the learning centers. I remember the learning centers as a temple-like space. I always felt very small in its overwhelming sense of presence. The study centers were constructed in the cleanest part of the school building and managed most carefully and made all visitors behave seriously. We had to have the faith in everything presented in the learning center. No one dared to question the materials or consider if what they taught was even possible. We are given ideological lessons on Juche Humanism. We were taught how the theory of evolution proved that any form of belief and superstition, such as shamanism, was rubbish. The only supernatural, superhuman beings we could believe in were the members of the Kim dynasty.

We were taught that to believe in anything or superstition was to challenge the teachings of the supreme leader and would get sent to prison. We had to make sure that we were dressed properly and that we were clean before we entered the room. We had to listen to the instructor's lectures carefully, especially when the instructor quoted the words of any one of the supreme leaders and their family. Attending learning sessions in the learning center was actually an emotional experience.

The learning centers inspired loyalty towards the Kim dynasty. In a way, it was like a church to the supreme leader, with its own rituals and rules. Such rituals were not only in the study centers. In fact, the whole nation venerated Kim Jong Il on the days following his death. My teacher told me Kim Jong Ill died a few days before the winter vacation. The adults guarded the mosaic murals of the supreme leaders' portraits all night because there were rumors about how spies were planning to harm the monuments. Each shift lasted two hours. The men stood guard while the women brought them food. We the students had to do our part as well. We cleaned the murals everyday from four in the morning until six. With so many students cleaning every day, we soon ran out of things to clean and kept cleaning those same spots over and over. I still do not understand why we had to clean the murals so much.

Now I want to share with you my experience of how I was punished for being not pure in my belief. This is my picture. This is a picture of my youth league membership card. It reads: "Let's always stay loyal to the venerate comrade Kim Jong Un, and be his vanguard of youth!" I had to carry this always with me.

All high school children had to sign up to the youth league on the same day. And I didn't wear my uniform to the ceremony. The youth league guidance officer confronted me, slapping my face from behind me and kicking me. He cursed me out for wearing civilian clothes and told me to never show my face in front of him.

One day I was arrested by MSS for watching South Korean movies and listening to South Korean music. My curiosity towards the music marked me as a student who actively disobeyed the teachings of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.

I eventually escaped and ran away.

When I returned to school, the guidance officer beat me severely. He made me stand before the entire school and cursed me out. He said that I was the type of scum who threatened the republic's socialist order and that anyone who followed my example would also be beaten. You have to understand that violent punishments, such as getting arrested by MSS and getting beaten, were not the only ways that the party made us obey Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. There were many more ways that I cannot describe it all. I took part in classroom criticism sessions as a student, starting when I was nine years old. I had to join these sessions when I joined the children's league.

I was young back then and passionately criticized my own mistakes and those of my friends. Our criticisms were on our failures to live up to the supreme leader's teachings.

Thanks.