

**Joongang Daily (Seoul, South Korea), July 9, 2012, Editorial**

## **[Viewpoint] The Bible is mightier than the nuke**

By Chun Young-gi



What would happen if a Bible translated in the North Korean dialect were distributed in Kim Jong-un's North Korea?

We say "the pen is mightier than the sword" to emphasize the power of thinking. When Hitler's offensive put the British in panic, Winston Churchill said in his speech, "You see these dictators on their pedestals, surrounded by the bayonets of their soldiers and the truncheons of their police ... yet in their hearts there is unspoken fear. They are afraid of words and thoughts: Words spoken abroad, thoughts stirring at home - all the more powerful because forbidden - terrify them."

Churchill firmly believed that language of freedom and thoughts of resistance would produce a powerful spirit unyielding to tyranny. What would happen if a Bible translated in the North Korean dialect were distributed in Kim Jong-un's North Korea? Wouldn't the spirit of freedom and liberation in the Bible stir the heart of the people in the oppressive regime? Wouldn't the monotheism in the Bible shake the idol worship of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un?

The Pyongyangeo Bible, or North Korean-dialect Bible, was published in Washington last month. The translator is 80-year-old Kim Hyun-sik, professor at George Mason University. He had taught Russian literature at Pyongyang University of Education before he defected to Seoul. The Pyongyangeo Bible is easy to read and straightforward. In the South Korean-dialect Bible, the word "Bible" has been translated as "the sacred book," but he translated it as "the promises of God." The Old Testament and the New Testament have been renamed "Before Jesus" and "After Jesus." The Book of John has also been changed to "The Joyful News Delivered by John." He purposefully chose hopeful and personal words such as "promise," "joy" and "news." The translation is straightforward and pleasant.

Five decades ago, Kim Il Sung promoted a language revolution to ban the use of dialects except Pyongyangeo, removed words with Chinese roots and adopted foreign words. The North Korean standard language, also known as Munhwaeo, was created. Professor Kim, a linguist, is the person who outlined the standard North Korean dialect. When he first read the Bible translation used in South Korea, he was quite confused. Many Christian and Catholic missionary groups have made great efforts to send such Bibles to the North, but hardly anyone there could

understand the text fully, as the dialects used in the South and the North have become so different.

In fact, the modern, South Korean-dialect Bible has not evolved much from the first version published in 1911. The text still has so many archaic words with Chinese roots and linguistic rules from the last century that even someone like myself who has been writing for 25 years cannot comprehend it completely.

Professor Kim Hyun-sik has been devoted to the project of translating the Bible into the North Korean dialect because the

North Korean people could not understand the South Korean ones. Let's look at a few verses from "The Joyful News Delivered by John": "In the beginning, he spoke his words. Everything was created by him. The life was within him, and that life was the light of the humanity." The same verses in the South Korean Bible's Book of John proceed, "In the beginning, there were words. All things were built up because of him. There was life within him, and therefore, this life was the light of the people."

North Korean people who were perplexed by the old and vague expressions in the South Korean-dialect Bible would be delighted by Professor Kim's translation. Throughout their lives, they have been taught that they must worship the "dear leader" as the sun, moon and first god in the 5,000 year history of Korea.

They would be shocked by the declaration of the Bible that the light of humanity is not the "dear leader." What terrifies a dictator are the thoughts stirring at home. The proclamations in the North Korean-dialect Bible may be more powerful than the nuclear weapons he believes will protect him from external enemies.

Surprisingly, the inspiration to translate the Bible into the North Korean dialect came from Hwang Jang-yop, materialist philosopher and former Workers Party Secretary who defected to the South. He wrote a recommendation for Professor Kim when he came to Yale University as a guest professor in 2003, and suggested, "The last remaining way for reunification may be the religious approach. Please consult the smart professors at Yale."

\*The author is an editorial writer of the JoongAng Ilbo.

