

SOAS-AKS
Working Papers in Korean Studies

No. 44

'Kim Jong-un Syndrome':
North Korean Commemorative Culture and the Succession
Process
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March 2015

Keywords: Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il, hereditary succession, dictatorship, history and propaganda, narrative construction, China and the Korean War, Sino-North Korean relations, North Korean art

In the three years since the death of Kim Jong-il and the formal acknowledgement of Kim Jong-un as head of state, the North Korean regime has made a series of moves to further augment and consolidate the ideological foundations of Kimism, and to cement the young leader's legitimacy. Historical narratives have played a critical, if often unnoticed, part of this process. The Korean Workers' Party propaganda apparatus has therefore subtly reshaped the history of both dead prior leaders and placed Kim Jong-un very much in their mold, to an almost clinical extent. This paper seeks to chronicle some of those historical changes and continuities, using frameworks developed by Rudiger Frank to show how and why Kim Jong-un, as the new leader, has been so ubiquitously juxtaposed as an executor of the will of his predecessors, rather than as an autonomous leader of his own accord. In so doing, the paper shows how ideological retrenchment and conservatism have been at the forefront of Pyongyang's narrative response to generational change, but also how historical narratives continue to be adapted to suit new circumstances.

I. 'Kim Jong-un Syndrome'

In August 2014, Anna Fifield, the *Washington Post's* bureau chief in Tokyo, took a trip to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), a visit occasioned by a delegation of Japanese wrestlers to the country. The novelty of a delegation of rather unusual foreigners in the North Korean capital city, and the DPRK's encouragement of yet another quirky sporting event, elicited global attention and sparked further speculation about Kim Jong-un's possible mania for foreign culture.

But even as North Korea appeared to encourage this external narrative of Kim Jong-un as eager for 'opening up' to the outside world, North Korean state publications and messaging was moving very much in a different direction. This much was made clear in one collection of materials which Fifield was able to examine at the state's Foreign Language Press, which the reporter promptly disseminated on the Internet (Fifield 2014).

Stemming from a book entitled *Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un In The Year 2012* (Thak & An, 2014), the text put forward a very clear interpretation of the world's embrace of new leader:

Since the death of Kim Jong Il in December 2011 the world has focused its attention on how Kim Jong Un, the new supreme leader of the DPRK, leads the country. 2012 was a year in which his leadership ability and great personality were fully exhibited and the Kim Jong Un syndrome swept the world.

The book's bold assertion of global consent, and even wonderment, expressed with respect to Kim Jong-un's place as Kim Il-sung's reincarnation in North Korea in 2012, is not perhaps as wholly fabricated as it first appears. It seems likely that the text refers back to a dispatch filed by Jean Lee and an Associated Press colleague in January 2012 which begins as follows:

The resemblance is striking: The full cheeks and quick smile, the confident gait, the habit of gesturing with both hands when he speaks. North Korea's young new leader, Kim Jong Un, appears to be fashioning himself as the reincarnation of Kim Il Sung (Lee and Kim 2012).

Rather than dwell on Pyongyang's only minor reshaping of this quote (or, for that matter, ask why an American news agency newly installed in North Korea would be so eager to create content so manifestly pleasing to their hosts), perhaps we would be better off dwelling on how *and why* Kim Jong-un is so eagerly and readily depicted by his own state's propaganda as, essentially, the reincarnation of his grandfather.

Ever since Kim Jong-un emerged for his first solo featured on-site visit in early January 2012, the North Korean leader has clearly been modeling his public persona and personal style on his grandfather, the DPRK state founder Kim Il-sung.

But apart from a few wild stories about round after round of plastic surgery that made this possible, is this congruity between Kim Jong-un and Kim Il-sung remarkable? In systems that tend toward high concentrations of executive power as well as historical myths of lone, principled, armed resistance against occupation, it makes sense that references to the formative leader would take place regularly, irrespective of blood ties. Successful political leaders and state founders tend to accrue admiration of various politicians. And North Korea may be an extreme example in which the state founder is worshipped as a kind of secular demi-god, but it is not necessarily extreme in every regard. However, the degree to which the North Korean state itself has played up Kim Jong-un and his resemblance to Kim Il-sung – moral, intellectual, physical and otherwise -- is perhaps unique in its intensity and the layered aspect of its approach.

Physical resemblance does not of course imply some kind of rigid policy overlap; in some ways, a move to reform from within (or to undertake certain ‘adjustments,’ to use the North Korean phrase) might be more easily undertaken by a clone of the Kim family than anyone else. Certainly it is true that in any other state, the physical resemblance between genetically related leaders would not lead, ipso facto, to outside assumptions of pure policy continuity between generations. In South Korea after all, Park Geun-hye may occasionally align herself with elements of her father’s agenda, and the same might be true for Abe Shinzo with his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke. However, by and large, the mass media and scholars do not take the bloodline – much less the physical appearance -- of either Park or Abe insofar as their predecessors are mirrored there as an object worthy of sustained analysis. By contrast, with Kim Jong-un, the abundance of images and the intense and intentional likening of the new leader with his grandfather has become a crucial element in the state’s self-depiction, and demands our attention.

The Korean Workers’ Party, however, does not produce narratives merely to be read by scholars. There is some kind of rationale behind what they do. In the case of Kim Jong-un’s resemblance to his grandfather and by highlighting this, it gives his

physical corpus meaning, and invests him with elements of succession legitimacy that he would otherwise lack entirely, given what we know of his biography. Along these lines, an Associated Press report from Pyongyang on the subject of the close resemblance between Kims of two different generations was not only reprinted in North Korea but heavily celebrated.

On the one hand, it is useless information; because so much of the cultural production is simply automatic. Take, for instance, the *Rodong Sinmun's* evident practice of leaving a blank space to fill in with any given Kim; the current occupant is thus a cipher whose succession is agreed to only at specific places and times, not throughout. There are jobs dependent upon the continuation of the generational approach to North Korean leadership. Take, for instance, the state historical committee, the museum sector, the entirety of the Propaganda and Agitation Department and the poets and writers and historians/social scientists who feed the mill. And at the end of the day, this is serious business: the Jang Song-taek death warrant pledged death to those who put Kimist inscriptions in shadow, for instance. North Korea has recommitted itself to this cult in a fashion that is both surprisingly reflexive and depressingly predictable. Perhaps, then, the reading of state propaganda narratives and the history of the Kims is capable of telling us nothing new, apart from the fact that the current leader is still alive and reveres his dead ancestors, and requires his subordinates to do the same. But to state its irrelevance would also be to ignore the fact that the Kim cult is a political survival raft for those in various sectors in Pyongyang, including musical sectors. Its massiveness is a key to its vitality in that respect. Against mounting counterpressures and shear forces such as marketization, foreign trade, and the spread of external information within society, the narratives of Kim family predestination are continuing for reasons which are self-evident to the state.

Less remarked upon has been the staggering degree to which the young new leader has also draped himself in the aura of Kim Jong-il, his father and predecessor, often down to donning the same clothing and making on-site visits identical to those of his

father. But Kim Jong-un has also been posed not just as the successor to Kim Jong-il, but as the late leader's reincarnation and avatar as well. Kim Jong-un donned his father's famous wrap-around sunglasses at the Mirim Riding Club in November 2012 (Cavazos 2012) and again at an air force demonstration organized expressly for him in May 2014; like other North Korean officials, he had an identical anorak (coat) to his father's; but he ditched this for his first on-site visit in January 2012 in favour of the black trench coat. Sartorial splendour it is not, but clothing he does a bit of trend setting but mostly follows tradition. Although he or his advisors approved of Kim Il-sung's statues being recast with a business (rather than a Sun Yat-sen) suit, Kim Jong-un has himself only been seen in a Western suit and necktie in his leadership photo, which did not show his whole body. Furthermore, in the Kim Jong-un era, the regime has put forward the new amalgam of "Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il ism," a category which, amid its other uses which we shall discuss, clearly shows the regime's tendency when faced with a new situation to fall back upon old models and turn to the past.

Although there is very little survey data of North Korean defectors (let alone North Koreans themselves still in the DPRK) about the impact all of this has on the average person.¹ But we have to assume from the limited amount of information we have that it is significant to the North Korean observers, because it is about legitimacy of a very young leader, exceptionally young, and the response to the regime's one-way push to associate Kim Jong-un with his predecessors. The question is, is this done simply for vague nationalistic inspiration, but for tangible policy guidance? Or is it mainly about covering over the weak spots in Kim Jong-un's resume and personality? It would seem to be a safe assumption that associations between Kim Jong-un and his predecessors serve to tamp down any expectation that his youth

¹ Defector surveys and interviews tend to focus on things like food, prison camp experiences, human rights violations, etc, and not much on the interviewee's views of Kim Il-sung. However, the Daily NK has done a number of interviews that give some insight.. The defector-author Jang Jin-sung also has provided some useful (if not entirely unproblematic) analysis of the sinews of the personality cult.

will in and of itself act as a lever for changing the system or an even limited liberalization. It is a kind of leadership by predecessor proxy.²

This paper now turns to the hypotheses tendered by Dr. Rudiger Frank, exploring the possibility that in fact Kim Jong-un does not understand his own system, and that his borrowing from past themes and memes is in fact arbitrary. What the paper shows is quite the opposite: While certain borrowing could be seen as improvisatory or merely reflexive, it is so ubiquitous as to be very thick and complex; there is a master plan behind it, which means that what it shows us and does not show us allows to make some fairly hard conclusions about how the regime is using the two dead Kims.

Since the arguments themselves are historical, this paper will delve into the history as much as possible. Among the topics covered will be the state's efforts to build up the personality cult and Kimism in the 1950s – 70s, first under the leadership of the bureaucracy and then under Kim Jong-il's personal guidance. The core of the analysis are Kim Jong-un's speech at Fourth Workers' Conference, other speeches by Kim, some historical research, views of North Korean biographical movies and state media output with an emphasis on visual and musical sources.

II. Rudiger Frank's Provocations re: Kimist Continuity

Analysis of the Kim cult and the role of the dead leaders within it is a virtual cottage industry, but it is usually done quite badly. Journalist John Sweeney's defiantly un-researched characterization of North Korea as a "Zombie Disneyland" should suffice to illustrate this point (Sweeney 2013). For men like Sweeney who associate themselves easily with North Korean prisoners they have never met, yet to whom

² Park Geun-hye has done a small amount of this; it is something my father did, you know what I mean, one has to explain a lot less.

they imagine themselves to be heroes, the state and the cult of Kim exists to be torn down. But without reference to its foundations, this will prove to be a difficult task. Looking at North Korea as a more long-term process of change toward more opening out and globalization, if such changes will take place, they will need to occur within the existing grammar of revolution. In other words, there is a need to research how and why North Korea is using the histories of its leaders, for this task should be of some use to researchers of various persuasions.

Rudiger Frank, of the University of Vienna, has done by far the best-informed and genuinely provocative (in the best sense of the word, in that it provokes a response) on the topic at hand; his writings are foundational for this essay. In a series of essays in the online North Korea-focused website of the Johns Hopkins SAIS, Frank lays out a number of essential questions, which I will summarize here, somewhat unfairly but for the sake of argument, as hard conclusions:

1. Kim Jong-un has a problem with his bloodline, specifically the Japanese ties on his mother's side.
2. In a state predicated upon the Manchurian Myth, Kim Jong-un is unable to show his connection to the guerillas.
3. Apart from some rumours that he participated in the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island attacks, he has no known personal experience of making revolution or participating in warfare.

Solutions

1. Kim Jong-un is extremely young, and thus leaning upon the bloodline argument is far and away the best thing he can do from a legitimating perspective, while in the meantime keeping as busy as possible trying to rack up achievements.

2. From a policy standpoint, the leaning upon tradition and hagiography which he has encouraged around his father, Kim Jong-il, serves to dampen any expectations both internally and externally for reform of the system.

3. From a factional standpoint, although there are no members left of the Kapsan faction, etc., and Kim Il-sung did his work well, Kim Jong-un's wielding of the bloodline legacy serves as a weapon against internal opponents who might fancy themselves as able to overtake Kim Jong-un and essentially run the state, enact policy independent of the center, etc.

What Frank has not deemed to analyse, and what has been much less remarked upon among scholars of North Korea, is the question of Kim Jong-il's beatification, changes within the hagiography, etc. Kim Jong-un has similarly presided over a major expansion of Kim Jong-il history which requires assessment, every bit as much as the Kim Il-sung parallels need to be assessed.

The use, inflection, and modification of Kim Jong-il biography by the state serves slightly different purposes for the current North Korean leader:

1. They normalize the notion of a backdated succession; i.e. that North Korean leaders can be destined to lead, and are in fact leading, from about the age of 18.

2. It emphasizes Kim Jong-il's blood ties to the Manchurian revolution in the absence of Kim Jong-un's own such connection.

3. It emphasizes Kim Jong-il over Kim Il-sung in certain respects; the idea being that betrayal of Kim Jong-il specifically is a kind of weapon that can be used over enemies within the Party when necessary. Here we have Jang Song-taek again, seen within the same type of matrix in which Kim Jong-il used his father's past as a weapon for gain within the bureaucracy battles of the 1960s and 70s.

In an absolutely essential overview of April 2012 propaganda in the DPRK, Vienna University professor Dr. Frank asks a troubling question: “Could it be that Kim Jong-un...lacks an understanding of how his own system functions? “ Is it possible that overemphasis on “Kim Jong-il-style patriotism” represents a displacement of Kim Il-sung and the rock of legitimacy which this represents?

III. The 15 April 2012 Speech

Kim Jong-un’s debut as an orator came on April 15, 2012. In the speech, Kim Jong-un admonished the functionaries to hold his grandfather and father — the latter man now the eternal General Secretary of the WPK — in high esteem. Considering a textual analysis of the 15 April speech, Kim Il-sung may indeed be the model for the new successor’s public image, but the lion’s share of the leadership references are indeed shared between the two dead leaders. 11 of 16 references to each Kim were joint: that is, Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung were often treated more or less as the same entity.

The speech was intended to signify Kim Jong-un’s grasp of the KPA tradition and position himself as the just and correct inheritor of those two Mausers which, in North Korean myth, were the germ of revolt against Japan and the basis for the KPA. Unsurprisingly, Kim Jong-un’s speech was interpreted within the confines of the North Korean propaganda state as a signal victory for the North Korean leader, the people, the state, the army, and their common future.

Both KCNA and *Rodong Sinmun* beat their respective drums in various ways to use the speech as evidence of Kim Jong-un’s brilliance. In yet another loop involving consciousness of outside media like AP, *Huanqiu Shibao*, and the Phoenix media group, all of which are now cited regularly in North Korean propaganda, these stories were used within the country as “proof” that the outside world, too, sees Kim Jong-un as a strong hand at the wheel. (Perhaps because these stories mentioned

Jang Song-taek, they have since been wiped from the *Rodong Sinmun* website.)

The most prominent aspect of the 15 April speech was its emphasis on history, particularly the history of the Army. It was as if 15 April, the anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, had become a stand-in also for 8 February and 25 April, both regarded at various times as the Founding Day of the Korean People's Army. A basic study of the document reveals that of the 3100 words of the speech, about 1200 dealt in some way with the history of the KPA. Not only that, but in the competition for bureaucratic supremacy, the statistics in Kim Jong-un's speech clearly favored the Army.

It has been remarked by repeated commentators, and the North Koreans themselves, at the efforts being made to liken Kim Jong-un to his grandfather.^[2] An interesting aspect of both the speech and related propaganda is how this process effectively minimizes Kim Jong-il. Take, for example, this KCNA dispatch:

DPRK People, Encouraged by Kim Jong-un's Speech

Pyongyang, April 16 (KCNA) — Kim Jong-un, supreme commander of the Korean People's Army, delivered a speech at the military parade on Sunday, President Kim Il-sung's 100th birth anniversary. His speech has inspired the Korean people with conviction of sure victory.

Pak Pong Ik, a war veteran, told KCNA: ["]The voice of the dear respected Kim Jong-un reminded me of the voice of Kim Il-sung, which I heard 59 years ago in a ceremony arranged in celebration of the Korean people's victory in the Fatherland Liberation War (1950-1953). I have been waiting for a chance to hear his voice. In his speech I saw a bright future of the DPRK. Kim Jong-un is really a symbol of the strength of the DPRK and the destiny of Kim Il-sung's Korea.["]

Paek Hwa Ryong, an officer of the Korean People's Army, said: "Listening to Kim Jong-un's voice, I thought of General Secretary Kim Jong-il, who said, 'Glory to servicepersons of the heroic Korean People's Army!' in a military parade 20 years ago. Kim Jong-un's concluding remark 'Let us advance towards the final victory!' will serve as the banner of the Korean people in building a thriving nation."

Is the reference to Kim Jong-il's single sentence at a public rally a means of equating him with Kim Il-sung, or, does it merely make him look ridiculous? Though statues are being built splitting the one into two, Kim Jong-il is shorter than his father in all the statues. If one wishes to engage in this kind of hair-splitting, in the fourth paragraph of the Kim Jong-un 15 April speech, we see, perhaps unintentionally, a similar slap at Kim Jong-il. Whereas Kim Il-sung manifestly *built* the armed forces, Kim Jong-il is merely *admired* by them. Kim Jong-un's apparent ease with being filmed and public speech, and the successor's borderline-ebullient first solo on-site visit in early January 2012 would appear to indicate some kind of subterranean loathing for the departed Dear Leader.

IV. Korean War Revivalism in DPRK: Historical Consolidation and Personality Cults

With the arrival of Kim Jong-un, the Korean War commemorations appeared to take on a new velocity, or at least, a new urgency in North Korea. They also took a decidedly (and somewhat belated) pro-Chinese turn in tactics which the *Global Times* (Beijing) called "cheap and easy" (Chen Ping, 2012).

KCNA's English-language coverage of the Korean War commemorations from June 20-August 1 2012 is of interest because of their obvious connection to the power consolidation of Kim Jong-un, as well as North Korea's relations with the US, South Korea, and Japan. They also impart the sweet-and-sulfur flavor of the extensive

series of mobilizations, meetings, song gatherings, and film viewings in North Korean cities that made up daily life in June and July.

If the North Korean populace was being mobilized in June and July of 2009 around a “150-day speed battle” industrial and construction campaign, it seems that in 2012, along with the “terrorism on the Northern border” and “death to rat Lee Myung Bak” memes, that the Korean War commemorations have been a central vehicle for the regime to keep the populace on its toes, ideologically speaking.

But perhaps more important — and more novel — is how the materials evidence of how the North Korean war narrative has changed and how it remained stable. If on the one hand the effort was made to argue for a continuity between Kimist regimes, the return to fulsome gratefulness to China in the last week of July of 2012, and the in-depth discussion of the glories of socialist internationalism before that, showed that North Korea seems determined not to go forward absent the protective shield of the Chinese People’s Republic.

As the actual initiator of the Korean War, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung (who ruled the DPRK from its birth in 1948 until his death in 1994) gets the kind of boost from the recent commemorations that one might expect. KCNA called him “the only prominent strategist and illustrious commander in the world” (June 29) and hailed repeatedly his “Juche-based war tactics” (June 30). Kim Il-sung’s genius in attacking Seoul is evoked on at least three extended occasions, linking clearly to recent assertions by the KPA that the city could be attacked again at any time.

One of the references raises the 105th tank brigade, a group currently associated directly with Kim Jong-un, allowing observers in the DPRK to draw their own conclusion: just like his grandfather, the newest North Korean leader is more than ready to plunge South in a great sweeping act of “self-defense” and sweep Seoul back into the socialist embrace of the DPRK, for the third time in history.

Kim Jong-un's implied association with Korean War propaganda received a boost on 4 July 2012, with the emergence of a new trope of Kim Il-sung ordering boat attacks on the US with four torpedo boats. This trope of naval success is not new but appears to have been brought out and repeatedly emphasized since the emergence of Kim Jong-un, whose personal propaganda since January 2012 (and arguably before) has been associated with the Cheonan attacks or something rather like them.

Returning finally to the war's mobilization benefits in the present, some actually interesting writing was released by KCNA on 30 June 2012. But predictably, this same essay gives way to rallying around Kim family specifically: "The U.S. forces and their mercenaries, armed with advanced weapons, could not match the DPRK people courageously fighting for their leader and country." And this could have been seen beforehand as a predictable interpretive turn, wherein North Korean teachers impress during Korean War education to children that their overriding imperative should be to 'protect Kim Jong-un.'

The writing reached a nadir on 25 July ("History of War Victory Everlasting"), with a look at Kim Il-sung's contributions to military strategy during the war. Completely — as is normal — ignoring the Chinese role in taking over the whole of North Korean military operations after December 1950, the writing ventures into wholly fictional terrain, evoking concepts — Juche and Songun — which did not emerge until the late 1950s and late 1990s, respectively: "The victory in the three-year Fatherland Liberation War was the victory of the Juche idea and Songun idea." The purpose of these essays, however, is to prepare the war veterans to urgently support the current leadership and impute to it the whole body of strategic advantage of the previous leaders, whose genius is to be taken for granted.

As is well known, North Korea both faithfully remembers and distorts its own history of the Korean War. The huge new Korean War museum in Pyongyang, formally opened on 27 July 2012, offers a treasure trove of clues as to how the current regime seeks to portray itself, how it seeks to enhance the charisma and

aura of authority around the current young leader, and how it wishes to ignore allies and demonize enemies (Haufler, 2015).

The reminder that enemies are eternally perfidious, meriting only bile and hatred never to be fully expunged or buried, appears to be why the Sinchon Museum still appears to receive generous state subsidies, and is why Kim Jong-un appeared there in late 2014 with his sister, decreeing that more money be spent to refurbish the facility and increase living standards of the women who work there as guides. Notably, in his first public visit to the site, Kim Jong-un recalled how he had visited the site in 1998 with his father, an aspect of his biography which none had yet remarked upon (KCNA November 2014).

If there is one thing that Kim Jong-un can be said to have done extremely well since coming to power, it is associating himself with the history of his two predecessors. He has draped himself in their mantle at virtually every turn, and evidenced no small understanding of their approach to statecraft. Kim Jong-un's famous speech of 15 April 2012, was largely a narrative history of the Korean People's Army. His attention to his grandfather Kim Il-sung's history as a young leader in the late 1940s (shades of "land reform") and during the Korean War has been a mainstay of state propaganda. And Kim Jong-un has been firmly situated within the textual fundamentals of Kimism, even going so far as to root the country's new "Byungjin line" in Kim Il-sung's policies of 1962.

Kim Jong-un has personally made exquisitely clear, through his prodigious physical movements and his words, that he fully understands and promotes an orthodox vision of history in which the United States is and remains the implacable and eternal foe. He made no fewer than three (state media asserted over a dozen) on-site inspections to the new Korean War Museum when it was under construction, examining models in imitation of his father's famous miniature demonstration of Pyongyang that had so pleased the founder, surveying the vast and lavish marble floors, examining wax statues of surrendering Americans, plowing through fake snowfields, inspecting a fake trench (twice), pointing out fake icicles while his wife

sported her Prada handbag, and of course admiring the *USS Pueblo*, the captured US vessel which had in February been pulled through the very streets of Pyongyang, to the great delight and anti-American mockery of all.

This is a man comfortable within the folds of this history, to the extent that he does not appear to mind imitating his grandfather's stately strolling pose or that the central massive statue in the Korean War Museum appears to look more like Kim Jong-un than the man who began the Korean War. (As the art historian Martha Haufler piquantly put it, 'There he stands -- whoever *he* is.') Kim Jong-un is therefore a grateful grandson, but it just so happens that to be filial coincides absolutely with highlighting his most easily marketable virtue, in the North Korean context, which is his cosmetic proximity to the sacred national founder in his younger years. Perhaps iconography is everything in a culture of 'visual coercion' (Haufler 2015).

V. Kim Jong-il Revisionism

As Kim Jong-un moves into his grandfather's shoes, another parallel shift has been taking place: The heightened incorporation of the young Kim Jong-Il into the Korean War narrative. This is particularly interesting and meaningful in the North Korean hyper-commemorative context, i.e., the state's extremely narrowly historical viewpoint on news and propaganda. This is a country, after all, where a story about a meeting in 1974 can be front-page news for almost a week, and forty years after the fact.

That the adulation of the Kims extends back into the Korean War is a given: Kim Il-sung (1912-1994), the state founder, ignited and survived the war, and himself immediately moved to solidify a narrative of his own unblemished record after the war by purging his Foreign Minister as the architect of every wartime error.

Even for readers whose acquaintance with history and North Korea is casual, Kim Jong-il's heightened prominence in the new Korean War history in the DPRK may seem strange, if only because the math seems a bit off. After all, Kim Jong-Il was

eight years old when the Korean War began in June 1950, and he was 11 years old when it ended in July 1953. Why, rationally, would North Korean propagandists and publicists and writers and historians bring Kim Jong-il into the foreground when it comes to celebrating the Korean War? Why would the current leader wish to do so, or approve of this depiction of his father? What does it tell us about the North Korean system that this is happening?

When the current Kim came into power, he and his advisors made the most conscientious and consistent attempt to elevate Kim Jong-il in the minds of the North Korean people, rather than allowing for any expression of doubt about the Kim Jong-il years which might have created a centimeter of distance between the father and the son that might imply the possibility of policy shifts. This is what I would call “Kim Jong-il revisionism.”

In some ways this is a process was happening even before Kim Jong-il’s death. Dramas from the late Kim Jong-il era, like “Now We Will Remember” and movies *Wish*, were already explaining the broader outlines of how Kim Jong-il really had a wonderful dream for Korea’s development, but it was the failure of the people to work hard enough to bring it into reality. (It is surely possible to remark how similar this particular propaganda trope is to the early postwar Japanese expressions of collective guilt for having failed Emperor Hirohito without capitulating wholesale to BR Myers’ rather problematic argument that the North Korean state is essentially a reflection of Japanese wartime fascism.) Today, Kim Jong-il’s contributions to the North Korean revolution are being interpreted as equal in weight to those of Kim Il-sung, and statues of the younger leader are increasingly (and expensively) being paired with those of the state founder around the DPRK.

When it comes to Kim Jong-il revisionism, Kim Jong-un surely has to be considered its foremost exponent. His filial moves to commemorate Kim Jong-il are hailed by state media as proof of his intelligence (KCNA, July 29, 2014). Calls for “Kim Jong-il Patriotism” are ubiquitous, and the concept continues to be fleshed out as, essentially, whatever the regime wants it to mean — usually something rather

conservative. Kim Jong-il may have approved of massive new Special Economic Zones with Chinese investment, but those kind of legacies are best amputated (brutally so, in the case of Jang Song-taek's execution). Vaguely un-socialist economic tendencies are thus left firmly excluded from the category of "Kim Jong-il Patriotism."

In promoting his dead father as a living political entity, the current North Korean leader has a great deal of help from the people around him—men that rose along with Kim Jong-il and abetted his rise, who are helping to cement, engrave, paint, and bronze the dead man's legacy even now. What this means is that the 1990s and early 2000s are now being interpreted as an era of great foundation building and sacrifice for the current year of prosperity and nuclear superiority. Kim Jong-il is seen as great modernizer, someone who sacrificed for the people's living standards and took the necessary steps to make North Korea a "strong and prosperous nation" (강성대국), amongst other efforts.



A Renewed Sense of Awe for Kim Jong-il's Accomplishments as a Man of approximately 30 Years of Age | Image: *Rodong Sinmun*, August 2013.

The Korean War commemorations of 2013 accelerated the ongoing revision by the state of the historical record of Kim Jong-il's childhood and teenage years. These are being built up with a kind of mania by the state; there is a real zeal among the propaganda apparatus for new and detailed narratives of Kim Jong-il's youth as a model loyal patriot. Perhaps this is a simple updating of the country's patriotic myths for its own use. There is, after all, a mound of challenges waiting in the future, and the difficulty of maintaining orthodoxy in patriotic education for the demographic balloon of youth is clearly something about which the state is thinking a great deal.

North Korea has recently been bringing Kim Jong-il's biography more firmly into line with the Korean War narrative. What this means is that Kim Jong-il, who actually spent most of the Korean War not in Korea but in Manchuria, within the relatively peaceful embrace of the People's Republic of China and the city of Jilin, is now being brought back firmly into North Korean territory for the duration of the conflict.

He is seen studying at his father's side, already on the road toward "Songun (military-first) leadership," preparing himself to rule over North Korea. Is very much what we see in the dynastic succession. It creates a sense of normalcy around the notion that an 8, 9, 10 or 11-year-old can prepare conscientiously to become the ruler of the state, and foremost above all, is capable of learning the arts of military leadership at such an age.

The state has already been pushing this line with respect to Kim Jong-il's activities some ten years later, in 1960, part of the North Korean state's busy attempts to layer on artifacts, stories, narratives, and events to add ballast to the Songun ideology. August 25, 2013, was abruptly commemorated as the "anniversary" of the 18-year-old Kim Jong-il's 1960 visit with his father to a tank corps that had pushed south

into Seoul only a decade prior. Effectively back-dating the succession from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il, the celebration of precocious Kimist militarism took center stage this August 2013 in Pyongyang.

The eight-year old Kim Jong-il's poem to his father at the Korean War battlefield has taken on the privileged position of a historically relevant document—now set to music by none other than the Moranbong Band in a concert performed on the 'Day of Songun.' (The concert, unfortunately, has been removed from YouTube for unknown reasons.) While the bringing forward of Kim Jong-il's youth could be seen as a quasi-Oedipal act in what one journalist (Fisher 2012) has termed 'The Infantilization of Kim Jong-il', the fact remains that Kim Jong-il's youth is vitally important for the securing (and re-securing) of legitimacy for the North Korean notion that youth and leadership go hand in hand.

VI. Conclusion: What This Means for the Kim Jong-un Succession Process

The tendency to bring out Kim Jong-il's youthful exploits has obvious import for the current leader, who arrived in office very much under the age of 30, and whose own sketchy biography remains open to much speculation. The idea from Pyongyang's point of view is, of course, that from the age of three the young Kim was essentially predestined to rule the country, and in a very Confucian way he thereby indicates that he was preternaturally destined to be a just ruler who understands all the precepts of the state and its ideologies. Naturally, the best way to learn this is from the lap of the leader himself.

But even where the state tries to create a strength, it reveals a weakness. Thanks to North Korea's famous opacity, we actually know little about the extent to which the current leader was exposed to such militant arts by his father. There is very little photographic evidence to suggest that between the ages of three or four and 25, that the current leader had anything whatsoever to do with the North Korean military

state or that he was in some way preparing for his current role. Not least: there are no public photographs of Kim Jong-un with his grandfather, who was very much alive and in command of the DPRK for the first nine years of Kim Jong-un's life. At some point down the road, these pictures may be shared, but then again, they might not exist. The thought that Kim Il-sung himself might not have explicitly approved of Kim Jong-un as an heir is not one which state historians and propagandists are eager to broach. Still less, the possibility that Kim Jong-un was in fact kept far away from the aging but still potent state founder in the 1980s and early 1990s, is not something which is brought up.

Even North Koreans within the country surely have some sense that their leader, as a youth, was gone from the DPRK for number of years and was very divorced from North Korean realities, precisely during the difficult period of the Arduous March (고난의 행군; the great famine in the 1990s) — a point that rarely follows from the standard evocations of Kim Jong-un's youthful worship of Michael Jordan. Kim Jong-il's newly "discovered" time in the DPRK for the duration of the Korean War (not just the traumatic flight from Pyongyang under a very real and heavy US bombing) is meant to deepen assertions of the young man's empathy for the suffering of the masses. Here his son has received no such treatment; there are no anecdotes — real or manufactured — about the young Kim Jong-un roaming the countryside during the Arduous March, understanding the horrors of life and death at the county level.

If the purpose of such portrayals is not purely to depict empathy, then what are they about? Under Kim Jong-un's rule, these portrayals of Kim Jong-il as young man are becoming more and more important due to the fact that they roll back Kim Jong-il's functional presence at the center of national decision-making toward an earlier and earlier date.

To state things more dramatically, the North Koreans are now backdating the Kim Jong-il succession, essentially, to the Korean War. This is remarkable, because it puts forward a pattern of succession and dynastic politics that goes back to the very

origins of the North Korean state itself. The fact that Kim Jong-il's own succession was not really solidified until the early 1980s is not simply immaterial here, it is literally three decades too late for the new North Korean historiography.

While it is true that exaggerating and manipulating history in the DPRK is not a new phenomenon, it must also be acknowledged that North Korean propagandists do not change the biographies of their leaders just simply because they have nothing better to do.

At the very least, the renewed emphasis on Kim Jong-il's youth goes beyond standard hagiography. It may indicate a level of concern among North Korean propaganda officials that Kim Jong-un is perceived as illegitimate, that there are doubts about the depth to which he has mastered—or even understands—the North Korean system over which he presides. Perhaps there are sensitivities in Pyongyang to assertions that he has still failed to consolidated power because Kim Jong-Il gave him access to so little, so late.

By creating allegories of Kim Jong-il at a young age at which the young North Korean heir was being entrusted with the keys of state and actively discussing governance and policy, the state now creates a clear allegory whereby Kim Jong-un can emerge as very much in the same model. In this model, young North Korean leaders are given access to privileged information and are predestined to rule; they are adept the military arts from young age. To such a system there appear no challenges, no alternatives, and no turning back. The appearance of a genius child predestined to lead the North Korean people forward into a nuclear workers' utopia has now become part of the bedrock of the Pyongyang regime.

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