NORTH KOREA: THE ROLE OF PROPAGANDA IN THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE KIM REGIME

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ABSTRACT

Propaganda has been used throughout history to influence and sway public opinion, particularly in totalitarian states. The aim of this thesis is to examine how the Kim regime in North Korea has employed propaganda for decades in order to gain and maintain power over its citizens. Its scope spans from the Korean War and the beginning of Kim Il Sung’s rule through the modern era and the newest Kim dictator. The thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter I, “Defining Propaganda and Exploring the Current Environment,” provides a description of propaganda and the strict measures of social and information control in North Korea. Chapter II, “History, Juche and Cultural Influences,” discusses its distinctive homegrown propaganda and ideology influenced by the former Soviet Union as well as Japanese and Chinese cultures. Chapter III, “Exploring the Kim Cult: Kim Il Sung,” chronicles the background and cult of personality built around the first leader. Chapter IV, “The Transition of the Propaganda Machine: Kim Jong Il,” focuses on the first dynastic succession and the establishment of the second Kim’s rule.
Chapter V, “The Next Kim Successor: Kim Jong Un,” addresses the transfer of power to the third ruler and his efforts to use propaganda to rebrand and maintain the power of the regime. The thesis concludes that the Kim dynasty and its use of propaganda will remain fundamentally unchanged as it continues to prioritize its main goal of sustaining power.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my wonderful husband, family, and friends. Thank you for all of your support and for always believing in me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>..........................................................</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>...........................................................................</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>...........................................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### I: DEFINING PROPAGANDA AND EXPLORING THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

- Social Control Environment ................................................... 8
- The Closed Information Environment ....................................... 10

### II: HISTORY, JUCHE AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

- The Divided Peninsula ............................................................ 18
- The Soviet Influence ............................................................... 21
- Juche Ideology ......................................................................... 24
- The Two Kims and Military First Ideology ................................. 27
- The Japanese Influence on Culture and Propaganda ................... 32

### III: EXPLORING THE KIM CULT: KIM IL SUNG

- Kim’s Initial Use of Propaganda ............................................. 38
- Kim Reinforces Self-Reliance and Military First......................... 39
- Kim Il Sung’s Death ............................................................... 42

### IV: THE TRANSITION OF THE PROPAGANDA MACHINE: KIM JONG IL

- Kim Jong Il’s Rise ................................................................. 46
- The Cult of Personality Begins ................................................. 50
- The Son’s Personality and Leadership Style ............................... 55
- His Transition: A Continual Work in Progress ......................... 56
- Elites and Military: Kim’s Military “Work” .............................. 57
- Rumors about His Demise Begin ............................................. 60
- The Dear Leader Passes Away ................................................. 61
INTRODUCTION

North Korea, the Kim regime, and propaganda. These words evoke different reactions throughout the world. This thesis argues that the propaganda used by North Korean leaders to gain and maintain their power is not a strict imitation of Cold-War communist model. Rather, it is a unique homegrown hybrid of Marxist thinking combined with Japanese and Chinese cultural and political influences stretching back to centuries. The thesis also examines in detail how the Kim cult of personality -- tailored to each of its leaders while reflecting the family’s heritage -- was promulgated by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong II and Kim Jong Un as a propaganda tool to control their nation.

An analysis of North Korea using mirror imaging techniques, a term referring to the notion that a state will act or react like any other state, lacks the necessary depth to analyze or predict the actions of this insular country. Americans must develop an understanding of the “hermit kingdom” on its own terms, no matter how reprehensible these may be, in order to formulate policies that meet our national interests.

The United States has long been involved in Korean affairs, and currently maintains a large military presence in South Korea. Examining the propaganda of North Korea -- and how it was shaped by its history, leaders, and
foreign influences -- can perhaps serve as a guide to analysts and decision makers on how to deal with this problematical nation.
CHAPTER I

DEFINING PROPAGANDA AND EXPLORING THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

In order to thoroughly examine the use of North Korean propaganda as a core tenet for regime survivability it is necessary to establish a definition of propaganda and explore the current environment in North Korea, particularly the use of strict measures of social and information control and how it reinforces the effectiveness of the propaganda. The country is known as the hermit kingdom and remains an enigma to most Americans and the world. Foreigners have only a vague understanding of the history, daily life, and propaganda environment of the citizens of North Korea. This lack of knowledge further inhibits the ability to rationalize and explain the actions of the regime, both foreign and domestic.

It is widely recognized that propaganda is used to influence people. Scholar F. C. Bartlett states that “propaganda is an attempt to influence public opinion and conduct – especially social opinion and conduct – in such a manner that the persons who adopt the opinions and behaviors do so without
themselves making any definite search for reasons.”¹ He further remarks that it appeals widely to emotions which then subvert reasoning. Another valuable definition of propaganda is by the historian Kenneth Osgood. He states, “At its core, propaganda refers to any technique or action that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, or behavior of a group, in order to benefit the sponsor.”²

Its use during World War I and by totalitarian regimes is well known and often referenced. Americans and citizens of other countries may feel that propaganda is easy to recognize and doubt the effectiveness of its use today, but may not realize its powers of manipulation and control when it is targeted toward a culture or belief system we do not fully understand. It has become a word that is difficult to define and many scholars agree there is not a real consensus on the true definition of the word.

There are three principles of propaganda. First, the idea or opinion to be propagated must connect with something the target set already feels strongly about and use various methods in order to appeal broadly to those sentiments on multiple levels, which further shapes and develops positive attitudes.


Second, the optimistic response to the idea or opinion is reinforced through manipulation, such as being mentioned frequently in the media and presented as news. Third, the propaganda is disguised and used as an explanation, and people believe it without feeling manipulated. The Kim regime masterfully uses all three of these principles for its benefit and main goal, to remain in power.

It may seem foreign to Americans that the blatant propaganda used by the Kim regime could be effective today because it appears to be manipulation in its most obvious form. The fact remains that it has been very effective at indoctrinating the country, but why? The answer lies in the fact that propaganda does manipulate the people, but they are not aware of that because it has always appealed to the citizens’ emotions and offered them plausible explanations for things they did not understand. According to Randal Martin, the psychological influences of propaganda should not be overlooked. He states, “The use of repetition of emotively charged words, slogans, monuments, and other imagery influences people through prestige and contagion, leading to

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irrational or not fully rational acceptance of another’s power over them. “

People often accept the opinion repeated in the news or from other putatively authoritative sources as fact, even in the U.S. and other societies where it is relatively easy to locate conflicting information. Additionally, an idea is easily accepted when it makes people feel superior or better about their situation.

The constant media barrage, rallies, celebrations, and dedicated songs and phrases used to venerate the regime may seem like counterproductive overkill to Americans. Much of this appeals to the North Korean citizens because it is centered not only on the greatness of the Kim regime but also on the proclamation that North Korea is the greatest country in the world.

For purposes specific to this thesis I define propaganda as the technique of deliberate mass persuasion used by the Kim regime in order to influence and shape the ideas and opinions of North Korean citizens, with the ultimate goal of making the people believe what the regime says is true, or reinforces their own beliefs. From the beginning of his rule Kim Il Sung appealed to broad nationalistic ideals when he came into power over the country. He manipulated the news and media to emphasize only his prominence and played on the North

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5Jowett and O’Donnell, Propaganda and Persuasion, 34.
Korean people’s preconceived notion that they needed a paternal figure to
guide their pure, virtuous, and innocent race, the:

race-centric ideology inspired by that of the fascist Japanese who ruled
the peninsula from 1910 until the end of World War II. The colonizers
had taught them to regard themselves as part of a superior Yamato race,
and the North Koreans in 1945 simply carried on the same mythmaking
in a Koreanized form.\(^6\)

At present, every generation in North Korea has been indoctrinated with the
same information that consistently reiterates the brilliance of the country, its
people, and leaders since the 1950’s, and “facts” that are seemingly ridiculous
and sometimes flat out wrong to outsiders are believed as truths inside the
country. The absence of access to outside information reinforces this belief
system because nothing is available to refute it. The social control measures in
the country are extremely severe, if not the most extreme in the world, and the
general public has little access to information other than what they are told by
the regime. This combination of intense propaganda and strict social control
measures has enabled the Kim regime to endure and the evolution of the
precedent Kim Il Sung set is what we witness today.

\(^6\)B. R. Myers, “North Korea’s Race Problem,” *Foreign Policy*,
Social Control Environment

It is frequently noted that the North Koreans live their daily lives in a unique propaganda-defined environment and it is unlikely to change in the near future. The lack of exposure has provided an unenviable environment for mass influence and persuasion. The social control measures in the country are extremely severe, if not the most extreme in the world, and the general public has little access to information other than what they are told by the regime. Since Reporters without Borders began publishing the annual world index of press freedom in 2002 North Korea has been ranked dead last almost every year.⁷

The citizens of North Korea do not receive any foreign newspapers, television, or radio broadcasts, and rarely meet foreigners.⁸ Scholars have made comparisons to the Cold War era of information control by the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, arguing that those citizens had more information available about life outside their own countries than North Korean citizens have.

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This is new level of control not previously encountered and reinforces the problem with approaching North Korea with Cold War era style policies.

North Korean experts, Hassig and Oh, stated:

A half-century of propaganda and social control has shaped the attitudes, values, and behavioral shaping as to transform the North Korean people into selfless socialists who unquestionably obey their leaders. The Kims’ attempt at total control, with multiple layers of control mechanisms reinforcing a corpus of lies, has created a society that on the surface is remarkably stable and resistant to change, considering the dire economic straits into which the people have fallen.

Regardless of the financial problems, food shortages, and their oppressive and invasive regime, the North Korean people are unlikely and quite possibly unwilling to change the status quo from the bottom up. The fact is, they cannot imagine anything different than the constant barrage of information they receive about their leaders. This level of information control largely pertains to the masses, or the majority of the working population, in North Korea.

However, there is a class of people excepted from the rule of information ignorance. The elite, or the upper political members that make up the higher echelon of the Korean Workers’ Party, has some knowledge about international affairs due to their privileged positions and proximity to the

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10 Hassig and Oh, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, 145.
ruler.\textsuperscript{11} Like the lower strata of society, which cannot conceive of rebellion, the
elite is also unlikely to challenge the Kim regime because although it has more
access to the outside world, it is under close and constant surveillance which
maintains its outward support of the regime.\textsuperscript{12}

The Closed Information Environment

The closed information environment in North Korea is a polar opposite
to the access Americans have to information and news. Every single source of
information is under the tight control of the regime. This type of tightly closed
environment has effectively silenced any objections reinforced through the
threat of internal spying, with North Koreans, despite their acceptance of the
regime, fearing the risk of imprisonment in a concentration camp. This
threatening environment has made opposition to the regime near impossible.

The level of control is felt even inside private homes. The ordinary
citizen is permitted to own televisions and radios that only receive North
Korean-owned stations, and widespread electricity shortages across the country

\textsuperscript{11}Hassig and Oh, \textit{The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom}, 134.

\textsuperscript{12}Hassig and Oh, \textit{North Korea: Through the Looking Glass}, 104.
further limits their use of them. Only permitting access to stations owned by the government allows the Kim regime to manipulate all information in its favor and does not allow access to any competing sources of information to interfere with the judgments claimed. North Koreans can watch television, but it remains a luxury item and there are no reliable statistics regarding how many homes own a set. The programming is quite monotonous when compared to modern American multi-channel options. Korean Central Television, KCTV, provides the news and other television programs on evenings during the week. On the weekend Mansudae Television shows entertainment programs and Korean Educational and Cultural Television also broadcasts programs throughout the week. These shows focus on the Kim regime and its activities, featuring celebrations in its honor throughout the country. Additionally, these programs are used to routinely denounce the actions of South Korea, the U.S., and sometimes Japan in order to remind the population of their enemies and reinforce the dangers of the outside world.

Radio programs are similar to those shown on television. Great care has been taken by the government to ensure all of the radios in North Korea are

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14 Ibid., 143.
analog and soldered to receive only the North Korean station, KCBS.\textsuperscript{15}

Listening to other radio stations is expressly forbidden and punishable by law. Foreign radios brought into the country must be registered at the police station and then taken to be soldered to the KCBS frequency. There are surprise inspections on households in order to ensure the radios have not been unsoldered and cannot intercept foreign broadcasts,\textsuperscript{16} especially Chinese and South Korean stations near the border areas where the government views access to them as a constant threat. The government also reportedly attempts to jam foreign radio broadcasts.

Print media is also produced solely by the government and the propaganda-filled \textit{Rodong Sinmun} is the official party newspaper. This publication calls the press a “sharp ideological weapon dedicated to staunchly defending and safeguarding the leader” and urges the press to “dye the whole society one color, the color of the revolutionary ideology of the great leader.”\textsuperscript{17} Much of this is comprised of several departments with titles such as: Party History Cultivation, Party Life, Propaganda for Juche Theory, and so on. Most


\textsuperscript{16}Hassig and Oh, \textit{The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom}, 159.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 135.
of the publication is focused on the activities of the Kim regime and is filled with very little fact.\textsuperscript{18} The government also publishes several other papers, perhaps to give the citizens a false feeling of variety, such as \textit{Minju Chosen, Democratic Korea, Pyongyang Sinmun, Pyongyang Daily}, the KPA paper titled \textit{Choson Inmingun Sinmun, Korean People’s Army Daily}, and the Socialist Youth League paper \textit{Chongyon Chonwi, Youth Vanguard} for children, but these all contain similar articles. In recent years the newspapers have been posted on the internal intranet, with instructions to read it first thing in the morning “in order to learn about the party’s intention and demands in a timely manner.”\textsuperscript{19}

Some North Korean citizens can access the intranet, but not the internet and probably do not even know that it exists or how it is accessed. The regime views this medium as a dangerous weapon that could easily challenge the isolation of the country. Only about 10 percent of offices have computers which provide access to the North Korean internal intranet called Kwangmyong.\textsuperscript{20} Modern information technology is not widely available in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 140-141.
\end{flushright}
schools; a person can apply for a series of permits to obtain a personal computer but most cannot afford the expense.\textsuperscript{21} A fiber-optic cable network began to be used for the intranet in 2002 and connects the major cities; but the network, constantly monitored by the State Security Department for suspicious or dissident activity, does not offer connections to the worldwide internet.\textsuperscript{22}

The limits on internet use within the country have not stopped a North Korean presence from becoming active on social media platforms for global propaganda purposes. The regime opened official pages on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook in recent years.\textsuperscript{23} These contributions, often ridiculed by the outside world, offer little actual insight into the country.

Despite the limited access to computer technology, cell phones have become quite common in recent years but users are not able to make or receive calls from the outside world unless they possess an illegal phone. Their use was banned from 2004 until 2008, and reportedly people caught using one

\textsuperscript{21}Hassig and Oh, \textit{The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom}, 146.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 146.

during this time were sent to prison camps or executed.\textsuperscript{24} Reportedly, cell phone users will reach the one million mark this year, although it is difficult to know exactly how many are inside the country because many citizens in border towns have illegal mobile phones smuggled over from China.\textsuperscript{25} The leaking of goods like these as well as information near the border areas of China and South Korea could eventually undermine the isolation of the country in these areas, but not everywhere in North Korea.

Despite the interest of the regime in maintaining a global internet presence, there are few ways for outsiders to obtain information about North Korea. As mentioned, most of these sources are official North Korean media and information providers affiliated with the regime. Such data are useful for obtaining general ideas about the regime’s policy decisions but do not provide much insight to analysts. Information is also available from journalists, businessmen, and diplomats who have visited the region; however their reports are incomplete because the government takes great pains to ensure these


visitors are only shown what the regime wants them to see, mostly the capital city of Pyongyang and national monuments glorifying the Kim family. Few are those who have met an “average” or “ordinary” North Korean citizen. The elites are ideologically safe guides that will shield foreigners at all times from seeing areas affected with extreme poverty and hunger, not to mention the work camps. For the foreseeable future North Korea will remain the most tightly controlled and closed society in the world, unless the new leader Kim Jong Un unexpectedly begins to open the society and change the course of the country. The history of the Kim regime, explored in the next chapter, suggests this sharp change is highly unlikely.
CHAPTER II
HISTORY, JUCHE, AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

There have been many events and cultural influences that led to the evolution of modern day North Korea. In order to understand the modern day regime and the influence of propaganda it is important to explore the historical background, cultural influences, ideology, and values of the Kim regime and North Korea. The distinctive homegrown propaganda has been influenced by the former USSR. It has been frequently overlooked, however, that it has more of a base in Japanese and even Chinese cultures than Soviet-style communism.

North Korea has a complicated history that is generally not well understood by outsiders. Prior to World War II North and South Korea were unified as one country. When the Korean peninsula was divided into north and south following World War II, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea became a country with limited interaction with the outside world.¹ Today, the totalitarian Kim regime continues to prevent communications and relations north of the Demilitarized Zone, the area that separates North and South

¹Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom*, 3.
Korea.² The communication ban means many relatives have not been able to have contact for over fifty years and places reunification as a priority and emotional topic for both countries, yet still unattainable. In order to understand why the peninsula was divided so many years ago, we must examine the origins of Kim Il Sung and the Korean War.

The Divided Peninsula

The origins of the Kim regime can be traced back to 1940. A month after the Japanese surrendered to the allied armies on August 15, 1945, a young Kim Il Sung returned to North Korea as a captain in the Soviet army.³ At this time the Americans entered Korea from the south to accept the Japanese surrender and the Russians took control over the north.⁴ The Cold War enemies capitalized on the separation that left both sections of the Korean peninsula open to political reformation, and thus began the polarization of the north and south. It also marks the beginning of American vested interests in South Korean affairs.

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³Hassig and Oh, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, 83.
⁴Ibid.
As expected, the Russians immediately moved to set up a governing body in North Korea to counter the American influence in the south. After a few failed attempts by the USSR to establish a successful head of a functioning government in North Korea, Kim Il Sung was selected by them to try his hand at leading the nation. He was appointed the leader of the first centralized government in the north in February 1946, mostly because the Soviets believed his background would allow them to easily build a personality cult around him and they believed he would remain loyal to the Soviet Union and the Russian version of communism. The support and guidance from Russia, coupled with the fact that most of the successful Korean politicians had fled to Seoul, helped Kim rise to power, relatively easily and lead to the formation of the Korean Workers’ Party in August 1946. Kim Il Sung continued to consolidate power eventually assuming sole power of the Korean Workers’ Party and becoming chairman in 1949. Through the support and political maneuverings of the Soviet Union a previously little known guerilla fighter became what many believed would be a communist puppet leader of North Korea.

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6 Hassig and Oh, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, 83.

Kim Il Sung’s solution to the divided peninsula was to reunify Korea under his rule. He launched the Korean War on June 25, 1950, after he obtained the support of his communist comrades Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. The brutal civil war between the Koreas continued until the Korean War armistice was signed in 1953 and resulted in the permanent division of North and South Korea along the 38th Parallel, better known as the Demilitarized Zone. The division is still a highly tense area with a large American military presence on the South Korean side, even though the Russians left North Korea years ago. Today American and South Korean soldiers stand guard every day and night and face North Korean armed forces posted on the other side. The situation is even tenser because since the North and South only signed an armistice, and not a peace treaty, both sides can be considered technically still at war.

The fact that North and South Korea remain divided continues to be of political importance. Reunification has been a topic of political strife for both countries and is continually discussed and hoped for by both even today. The division of Korea following the surrender of the Japanese was believed to be a

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8Ibid., 53.

9Hassig and Oh, North Korea: Through the Looking Glass, 84-5.
temporary solution; however the Soviet influence in the north and the
American influence in the south made it almost impossible for reunification to
happen. Further complicating matters at the time is that the government in
South Korea had been rather quickly recognized by the United Nations and the
South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, had the support of the U.S.\textsuperscript{10} The U.S.
was deemed the ultimate enemy by North Korea long ago, largely due to the
communist Soviet influence, and is constantly vilified as the reason
reunification cannot happen. The resistance of the American military to leave
South Korea confirmed the North Korean propaganda that paints it as evil
occupiers with an unwanted presence on the peninsula.

The Soviet Influence

It is understandable that comparisons are frequently made between
North Korea and the members of the Cold War Warsaw Pact because of the
Soviet influence on the country. It has even been called the country of the “last
communists.” Its longevity is surprising; it survived the fall of the Berlin Wall
in 1989 and the following collapse of the Eastern European communist
regimes.\textsuperscript{11} It has resisted political uprisings and remains an isolated state in the

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{11}Bruce Cumings, \textit{North Korea: Another Country} (New York: The New
Press, 2004), 149.
post-Soviet world, even surviving the deaths of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il. If North Korea is communist, then why did it survive the fall of communism? After all, North Korea was founded on Soviet principles, including a tightly organized central party, a top-down bureaucratic administration, communal allocation of goods and services, and collective farming.\textsuperscript{12}

It is important to explore the reasons how North Korea is different from its communist counterparts during the Cold War to understand the survival. According to North Korea experts Hassig and Oh, “North Korea differs from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in at least one important respect; namely, the greater social control that the government exercises over the people prevents the formation of organized resistance groups.”\textsuperscript{13} It is well known that social groups, uprising in protest and gathering to make their voices heard, contributed to the mostly peaceful fall of communism in the Cold War era. As far as anyone is aware, no resistance groups of any kind exist inside the country due to the strictness of the regime.

\textsuperscript{12}Cumings, \textit{The Two Koreas: On the Road to Reunification?}, 54.

\textsuperscript{13}Hassig and Oh, \textit{North Korea: Through the Looking Glass}, 34.
North Korea continues to differ from its former Soviet counterparts in the way its leader is revered and the fact that it rejected communism as its ideology and established a hereditary dynastic-style succession with one family at the forefront. For example, when we examine the culture of this country it shows an overall allegiance from all North Koreans to their great leader Kim Il Sung, arguably even more universal and profound than was the admiration for Stalin among the Soviet populace. Many scholars believe that North Koreans genuinely revere Kim Il Sung. B. R. Myers notes as follows:

Even among the few North Koreans who have left the country and stayed out, a heartfelt admiration for the Great Leader is mainstream. This has much do with the far greater psychological appeal of nationalism itself, but Kim Il Sung’s peculiarly androgynous or hermaphroditic image also seems to exert a far more emotional attraction than any of the unambiguously paternal leaders of Eastern Europe were able to.¹⁴

Kim Il Sung cultivated a different type of persona that appealed to his citizens in contrast to his stoic and hardened counterparts such as Stalin. The fact that even defectors still show loyalty to Kim Il Sung reinforces the unlikelihood of the populace to stage an upheaval of the regime, let alone that such a change could have a peaceful end result. These reasons only confirm that the Cold War model of the reunification of East and West Germany is not a useful model or applicable to the current situation on the Korean peninsula.

¹⁴Ibid., 112.
Juche Ideology

Despite the initial backing of the Soviet Union, Kim Il Sung quickly distanced himself and developed his own worldview that differed greatly from communism and focused on nationalistic principles. This “new ideology” was formulated and propagated mostly by his son and is referred to as Juche or Juche Thought, which translates to “subject” or the “subject idea” in English. These concepts emphasize national self-reliance, independence, and the worship of whichever Kim supreme leader is currently in charge.\(^1\)

Kim Jong Il, like his father, continued to employ the ideological indoctrination of the Juche idea as a form of social control and it is likely his son Kim Jong Un will continue to do so. The idea was introduced by Kim Il Sung in 1955 during a speech to the Korean Workers’ Party Propaganda and Agitation Department. The speech outlined the central Juche idea that national self-reliance and pride are of the utmost importance.\(^2\)

This focus on independence in politics, economics, defense, and ideology dovetailed nicely with Kim Il Sung’s foreign policy objectives at this time of self determination. He aimed to have his country become completely independent from both Russia and China and even


\(^{2}\) Ibid., 17.
envisioned no longer needed their aid. Additionally, reunification with South Korea under the North’s control remained one of the main ideological objectives and the constant call for Korean nationalism reinforced that goal.

Juche ideology is an important factor in understanding North Korea, its people, politics, and propaganda but the lack of a full explanation of Juche leaves the rest of the world unsure of what it actually means. When asked for a definition even Kim Il Sung himself declined, stating in a 1972 speech, “You requested me to give a detailed explanation of the Juche idea. But there is no end to it. All the policies and lines of our Party emanate from the Juche idea and they embody this idea.” In reality, all policies stem from the regime’s interest in self-preservation. Trying to make sense of Juche is a fruitless exercise because it has essentially been used as a smoke screen. The ideology has been a source of confusion in other countries, where many have mistakenly assumed the real meaning has been lost in translation or not released to the rest of the world. Korea expert Myers believes Juche was never meant to become a

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19 Hassig and Oh, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, 18.
new ideology; it was simply part of a speech using terms that confuse even North Koreans. Propaganda molded it into Kim Il Sung’s personally formulated idea in order to establish a specific non-communist North Korean ideology and to reinforce Kim’s propagated reputation as a great thinker. In his speech Kim had reminded propagandists that the “subject” of ideological work was the Korean revolution and that instead of merely copying the Soviet ideas, the party needed to establish the proper “subject” in its propaganda work.\(^\text{20}\)

The repetition of the word and the general convoluted manner of his speech led to the focus on the word as a new ideological concept. While the idea does highlight Korean nationalism, we can deduce that is only the case because it aided in the ideological indoctrination of its citizens. Myers further concludes that the focus of foreign governments on this speech and “new ideology” only encouraged the propaganda machine to publicize the Juche Idea as Kim Il Sung’s personal and genius original thought.

A central part of the ideology that can be understood is the emphasis on unity, most importantly under the regime but assumedly also in regards to bringing South Korea under North Korean power. According to the North Korean press, the Juche ideology is “a compass showing the course for a

country and its people to follow, a foundation on which an entire nation comes together in a wholehearted unity, and a banner of victory that leads a nation to infinite prosperity and development.”

For example, this quote from the current North Korean constitution states:

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea makes Juche ideology with a people-centered view of the world that aims towards the realization of the independence of the masses, the guiding principle of its actions. For the popular masses to be an independent subject of the revolution, they must be united into one organization with one ideology under the leadership of the party and the leader. Only the masses, who are united organizationally and ideologically, can shape their destiny independently and creatively.

North Koreans are constantly receiving this type of ideological propaganda and while they may not have a complete understanding of their new ideology, they likely do align with the appeal of becoming united and prosperous.

The Two Kims and Military First Ideology

Another important aspect in understand the regime is the military first policy, or “songun” in Korean, attributed to Kim Il Sung but further emphasized in the 1990’s by Kim Jong II. It places national defense as the number one priority and is sometimes even referred to as ideology. Kim Il Sung stressed the policy was necessary for self-reliance, while Kim Jong II

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22 Ibid., 22.
believed that the militarization of the entire society would help to sustain his regime and stabilize the country. Therefore he began to increase the size of the forces and gave them the highest priority in policy. Kim Jong Il was never able to fully hide his desire for nuclear weapons and he derived confidence from the idea that becoming a nuclear state would make his country a force to reckon with in the international arena. Again, this was a tactic to reinforce his power and that of North Korea. His new take on the policy justified him to allocate as much money and resources as needed to develop them. The military had long been a main concern for North Korea and continued to receive preferential treatment and more than adequate funding before the implementation under Kim Jong Il, but only evolved into a core component in politics after the death of Kim Il Sung. The eventual elevation of its status

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under Kim Jong Il can be linked directly to his constant involvement in military affairs.

Efforts to enhance his de facto control had been under way since the early 1980s, when he began visiting military bases, giving presents to division commanderson, and receiving reports on key developments in the military on a regular basis. Since assuming official positions in the military in the early 1990s, Kim Jong Il invariably presided over promotion ceremonies for general officers, personally pinning stars on their shoulders. By the end of the decade, several hundred KPA general officers “owed” their promotions to their supreme commander. In this manner the younger Kim set out to essentially “buy” the continued loyalty of top military officials after his father’s death. It was not uncommon for senior officers to receive expensive and rare gifts, such as luxury vehicles and summer homes. During his reign over a populace of 20 million citizens he boasted 1.2 million active-duty soldiers and 5 million reservists, and personally placed roughly 1,000 of the 1,200 generals. As is the case in many autocratic states, this emphasis on the military helped to prevent both external and domestic challenges against power. However, an interesting result of this prioritization in North Korea is that the Korean People’s Army can be

\[26\] Ibid.


\[28\] Ibid.
considered stronger than the Korean Workers’ Party, and even calls for party members “to be armed with the revolutionary spirit of the army.”\textsuperscript{29}

Additionally, \textit{Rodong Sinmun} has stated, “the military first policy is a line putting the Army before the working class.”\textsuperscript{30}

The term “songun” is frequently used in propaganda that highlights the strength and power of the military in North Korea’s mission to remain self-reliant and reunify with South Korea. It was first mentioned in the New Year’s Day editorial in January 2000 as follows:

Kim Jong Il had devoted much time throughout the preceding year to the tasks of inspecting the front-line, safeguarding the fatherland with the People’s Army, and leading socialist construction. The Comrade Kim Jong Il’s military first politics depends on the People’s Army as a pillar of our revolution, enabling the entire people, including workers and peasants, to wage their struggle armed with revolutionary army spirit;

\textsuperscript{29}Jae Cheon Lim, “North Korea’s Hereditary Succession: Comparing Two Key Transitions in the DPRK,” \textit{Asian Survey} 52, no. 3 (May/June 2010): 550-570.

this is a powerful and refined socialist political method that radiates brilliantly.\(^{31}\)

Kim Jong Il became so devoted to the ideology that in 1992 he deleted all references to Marxism from the constitution and replaced them with “songun.”\(^{32}\) Additionally, Rodong Sinmun is quoted as saying, “Songun politics is the guarantee that will secure the reunification of the Fatherland” and “The Songun ideology is a new, higher stage of the Juche ideology,” much in the same way early Juche propaganda proclaimed it was a new, higher stage of Marxism-Leninism.\(^{33}\) Given that the policy is revered in this manner it is possible it could replace Juche as the national ideology in the future with Kim Jong Un at the helm. It was the only viable tool left for Kim Jong Il to use in order to implement his national policy and he would frequently brag that his power came from the military, and we can expect to see similar behavior from


the next leader. A large and built up military could prove problematic for international affairs, whether the regime collapses or maintains power. Kim Jong Il’s death leaves the future of military first priorities to the young Kim Jong Un.

The Japanese Influence on Culture and Propaganda

While many are quick to align North Korean propaganda with communism, in actuality it is more of a unique blend of various cultures and ideals. The roots of Kim Il Sung’s propaganda can be traced to imperial Japan prior to World War II. It was touted that under Kim Il Sung’s “protective rule the child race could finally indulge its wholesome instincts, and as in imperial Japanese propaganda, the dominant dualism was one of purity versus impurity, cleanliness versus filth.” The Japanese influence on North Korea is much stronger than any Eastern European communist influence in terms of the propaganda history.

In order to earn the hearts and minds of North Koreans, the regime based the propaganda on what the people already had learned and accepted from the occupation of the Japanese. North Korea “borrowed” elements, such as Japan’s

34 Chang, Nuclear Showdown: North Korea Takes on the World, 73.

35 Hassig and Oh, North Korea: Through the Looking Glass, 38.
leader Hirohito as the parent of a childlike race that personified the virtues of racial purity and innocence; he was referred to as the Sun of the Nation and Great Marshal, and the citizens had to hold him in the highest regard and even be ready to die for their leader. The Kim regime replaced the old with the slightly different new and even referred to Kim as the Great Marshal.

The new propaganda played very well into what the North Korean people already believed about themselves, their race, and what kind of leader they needed. A “uniquely pure and virtuous race” would need a strong leader to guide and show them the way to prosperity and success.

It was the Japanese who taught the Koreans to see themselves as part of a uniquely pure and virtuous race. All the Kim Il Sung regime did was to expel the Japanese from that race and transpose the familiar Japanese symbols into Korean ones – replacing the divine racial founder Jimmu with the homegrown Tan’gun, Mount Fuji with Mount Paektu, and so on.

The regime built up a strong new national myth based on these stories. Additionally, the innocent race theory explains the frequent references to “Parent Leader” in the propaganda. “The North Korean cult derives Kim’s greatness from his embodiment of ethnic virtues: he is the most naïve,


37 Ibid., 77.
spontaneous, loving, and pure Korean – the most Korean Korean – who ever lived. As one propagandist recently put it, Kim Il Sung is the ‘symbol of the homeland.’”

Yet another influence on the culture that aided the acceptance of the propaganda of the regime is Confucianism. Confucianism is an ideology that has been used by empires in eastern Asia to legitimize “benevolent kingship” and is most often associated with the practice of respecting elders and ancestors. It is based on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius that emphasized principles for self-guidance, including treating others with respect, showing benevolence, reciprocity, and filial piety. North Korea has routinely been described as Confucian based on the fact that it has successfully used a hereditary patriarchic leadership succession. The propaganda even used Confucian phrases such as “mandate of heaven” and “filial piety” to build on

38 Ibid., 100.


the cultural ideas and continue to legitimize Kim Il Sung’s rule.\textsuperscript{41}

However, many disagree that North Korea is a true Confucian state and note the fact that the regime uses “mother” in reference to Kim Jong Il is not in line with true Confucian ideals. It also fails to uphold the key Confucian tenet of respect for people who do not respect the lives of fellow human beings. Scholars further explain the official North Korean culture clashes with Confucian teachings in significant respects. “Confucius demanded rigorous self-cultivation through study; the Kim regime urges its subjects to remain as childlike and spontaneous as possible. Confucius considered no race better than another; North Korea regards the Korean people as uniquely virtuous.”\textsuperscript{42}

Regardless of these major differences, the regime had been able to manipulate the population into believing Kim Il Sung had a birthright to rule the country and establish his son as the next in line without much resistance. According to Selig Harrison, Director of the Century Foundation’s Project on the U.S. and the Future of Korea, “The ideal leader in Confucian ethos rules through the


\textsuperscript{42}Myers, \textit{The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves And Why It Matters}, 96.
moral power of his exemplary behavior and the wisdom of his teachings, not through brutal coercion. Wisdom is handed down from the leader to the people, who learn what is ‘correct’ through the rote mastery of the truth.”\(^{43}\) The portrayal of Kim Il Sung as the exemplary Korean is in line with these ideals but the true actions of his regime and subjugation of the people are not.

CHAPTER III
EXPLORING THE KIM CULT: KIM IL SUNG

In this chapter I would like to explore the background and personality cult of Kim Il Sung in further detail. He set up the model of modern day North Korea through a series of calculated moves. As his power grew he manipulated the trust of his citizens, eliminated outside influences, and changed the course of the country while establishing the building blocks of a dynasty.

Contrary to popular belief, he was not destined to become a political leader. In fact his background and upbringing is much more humble than the man he became later in life. His real name was Kim Song-ju, born on April 15, 1912 near Pyongyang, two years after the annexation of Korea by Japan.¹ When he was seven years old his family moved from Japanese-controlled Korea to Manchuria, and his military career began in his early twenties joining a guerilla unit named the Korean People’s League.² He then spent his next several years fighting the Japanese in small guerilla units, changing his name to

¹Michael Harrold, Comrades and Strangers: Behind the Closed Doors of North Korea (Hoboken: Wiley, 200), 23.
²Hassig and Oh, North Korea: Through the Looking Glass, 82.
Kim Il Sung, a famous Korean resistance fighter.\textsuperscript{3} Kim believed he could bolster his military reputation by taking the prominent name of a well known man with proven military prowess, since most of his experience was with revolutionary armies and he was not formally trained.

**Kim’s Initial Use of Propaganda**

Kim used the division of Korea as an opportunity to continue to shore up his power through propaganda. He became president of North Korea under the 1972 constitution, a position he held actively until his death in 1994 at age 82 from a heart attack.\textsuperscript{4} The propaganda surrounding him was first established by the Russians who had appointed him as leader; but throughout his fifty-year rule a very sophisticated and decidedly North Korean image was constructed for him with the lines between truth and fiction forever blurred. Hassig and Oh state, “Once the North Korean government was well-established, by the 1950’s, the propaganda and agitation people began to rewrite North Korean history to put Kim Il Sung at its center, downgrading and later expunging the roles played


\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., 85.
by other people and even other countries.” A prominent example of how he changed the past in his favor is found in the official history books in North Korea. These books state the Korean War began when North Korean troops had to defend themselves from an attack by American and South Korean forces, a claim made in order to propagate hatred toward both countries.

His personality cult evolved quickly and far exceeded that of his Eastern European counterparts. In fact, Myers notes that “by the end of the 1940’s the leading university had been named after the leader, his home village of Man’gyongdae had become a national shrine, and his statue had gone up in several cities. Unlike Stalin and Mao, Kim tolerated no sub-cults of the second or third in command.” He changed history in his favor, glorified his own name, and did not allow anyone to serve too close to him in order to continue to consolidate support while simultaneously eliminating any future threats to him.

Kim Reinforces Self-Reliance and Military First

At this point during his rule Kim also began to minimize the fact that Russia and China had aided North Korea or even contributed to setting up the government. For instance, in order to ensure his military first policy and

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reinforce the separation from Soviet Russia, only Kim Il Sung’s portrait was displayed at the founding of the Korean People’s Army on February 8, 1948, instead of photos of him with Stalin.7 Furthermore, his speech at that event emphasized the importance of unity and the military first policy to the future success of the North Korean nation. He stated, “At all times and in all places our people must take their fate into their own hands and make all plans and preparations for building a completely self-reliant, independent nation in which they alone are the masters, and a government unified by their own hands.”8 His focus on North Korean self-reliance made it necessary to erase the historical help from the Soviet Union and enabled him to shift the focus to the power of his domestic military.

In the move toward self-reliance the role the Chinese had in helping to fend off forces during the Korean War at the 38th Parallel was also downplayed. Two years after the armistice Kim stated in his Juche speech, “If we had not organized the People’s Army with old revolutionary cadres at its core, what would have been the outcome of the last war? It would have been impossible for us to defeat the enemy and win a great victory under such difficult

7Cumings, North Korea: Another Country, 124.

8Ibid., 125.
situations.”⁹ There is no mention of any help from the Chinese and again the national focus is the greatness of his military.

One wonders how it is possible that North Korean citizens who experienced the events of the Korean War could possibly believe the egregious changes to historical events the regime touts as facts. This idea often leads citizens of other countries to deduce that North Koreans must have undergone a type of brainwashing. However, it has been noted by Korean experts that the population is not necessarily brainwashed into believing the propaganda even though they do not ever outwardly oppose it. In fact, “Korean nationalists do not seriously believe that they were never aided by foreigners. Rather, they think that because the aid was motivated by self-interest, it is not historically meaningful, nor does it warrant grateful acknowledgement.”¹⁰ This idea dovetails nicely with the worldview that their race is innocent and allows the propaganda to continue to change history without interference from the general public.

The regime had such success with the early establishment of a cult of personality that it continued to make progress when Kim Jong Il became the

⁹Hassig and Oh, North Korea: Through the Looking Glass, 101.

¹⁰Myers, The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves And Why It Matters, 44.
head of the propaganda department while his father was still alive. One of his main objectives at the time was to ensure that his father was not overshadowed by China’s famous dictator Mao. The result is that several of Kim Il Sung’s myths are meant to show that he was equal, if not superior to, Mao, for example:

It was also ‘remembered’ that in the 1930’s the General had taken his partisans on an Arduous March every bit as heroic as Mao’s Long March. And if Mao had routed the Japanese without foreign help, then so had Kim. This last claim necessitated the withdrawal of countless reference works and school books that had paid fawning tribute to the Red Army.\(^{11}\)

Mao was a well known poet, and later the propaganda department released verses presumably written by Kim Il Sung in his youth, although his poetry had never been acknowledged previously.

**Kim Il Sung’s Death**

Kim Il Sung died on July 8, 1994 after ruling North Korea for 54 years. His death was truly mourned by the North Korean people, who had come to believe the decades of propaganda and remembered him as the leader who led them with “fatherly love” and helped them to recover from the brutal Korean

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\(^{11}\)Ibid., 44.
No matter how old he became the depiction of him was always the same, a jovial and relaxed man, unwrinkled by time but shown a bit fatter, with great pains taken to hide the unsightly goiter that affected him in real life in his pictures and portraits. His pictures are still seen everywhere in North Korea today and his influence is still felt. He is now referred to as the “Eternal Leader,” since his rule could not be interrupted even by his death. Hassig and Oh highlight that “the true facts of his life – his failure to liberate Korea from the Japanese, his responsibility for starting the Korean War, and his small stature on the international stage – had been replaced over the years by a fabricated history of an ‘ever-victorious’ soldier and a leader of the progressive peoples of the world.” It is hard to fault the North Koreans who truly felt connected to him and endured pain over his passing. Scholars have noted that even today the majority of North Koreans do believe he was an exceptional leader who helped to bring them independence and improved their quality of life.

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12 Martin, Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty, 1.


14 Hassig and Oh, North Korea: Through the Looking Glass, 85.
life, venerating him far more than his successor and son Kim Jong Il. The death of Kim Il Sung resulted in the transition of the power of the regime and the propaganda machine to focus on the son. The world was ready and anxious to see what would happen with the next Kim leader firmly in place, even if the North Koreans were still mourning his father’s death.

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CHAPTER IV
THE TRANSITION OF THE PROPAGANDA MACHINE: KIM JONG IL

The Kim regime marched on after Kim Il Sung’s death, and the transition of power to Kim Jong Il had begun well before Kim Il Sung died. The propaganda of Kim Il Sung was so pervasive and all-encompassing that it almost guaranteed one of his progeny would be destined to take over the leadership of the country without any interference from its elite members. Kim Jong Il spent his life learning propaganda tactics from his father and was determined to stay in power, despite the fact that they were very different in several ways.

The favored son and heir apparent was born on February 16, 1942 to a father and mother who had been fighting Japanese forces since 1932. He probably came into the world in 1941 but this date was likely changed in order to celebrate milestone father-son birthdays with extensive national events at the same time. According to the official propaganda his birthplace was on sacred Mount Paektu near the border with China; it is believed, however, that he was

1Cumings, North Korea: Another Country, 155-6.

probably born near Siberia after his parents had fled to the Soviet border when
they were pursued by the Japanese.\(^3\)

**Kim Jong Il’s Rise**

Many believed the transition to Kim Jong Il would fail because he was
so unlike his father, much in the same way many would feel about Kim Jong
Il’s own son, Kim Jong Un, in the future. There were several differences
between the two Kims, even physically. Korea expert Bruce Cumings notes
that:

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\ldots \text{if the father was tall, handsome and charismatic, standing over six feet with a broad forehead prized by Korean mothers and aestheticians, the son looks just like his mother – a formidable woman, nurturing, kind, and fun loving, but less than five feet tall, standing pear shaped in her guerilla uniform.}\(^4\)
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His smaller stature and feminine appearance may have contributed to his
reported inferiority complex. This, however, did not hamper his ability to grasp
power and employ the propaganda machine, at first with the support of his
father.

Despite the obvious physical differences between father and son there
was more common ground between the propaganda of the two than there were

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\(^3\)French, *North Korea: The Paranoid Peninsula - A Modern History*, 57

significant differences. Exactly like his father, Kim Jong Il the Dear Leader was proclaimed to embody Korean virtues and was therefore the greatest man alive.\(^5\) He was unofficially designated as his father’s successor around 1972 when Kim Il Sung appointed him to work in the Korean Workers’ Party Propaganda and Agitation Department, shortly after the introduction of the Juche ideology. His self-designated role in this department was to propagandize and interpret the Juche ideology while overseeing cultural affairs. He declared himself a Juche expert and he claimed to have written over 400 papers on this subject.\(^6\) His role under his father continued to slowly evolve as he assumed more responsibility and notoriety. In 1980 Kim Il Sung placed Kim Jong Il in senior positions in the Politburo, Central Military Commission, and Party Secretariat, having been designated the unofficial successor at least a decade prior to these appointments.\(^7\)

The young Kim quickly fully embraced the use of propaganda to ensure his position as heir to the dynasty and used Kim Il Sung as a model. For


\(^{6}\)Hassig and Oh, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, 21.

example, Kim Il Sung was always referred to as the Great Leader and, while he was still alive, Kim Jong Il began to be called the Dear Leader. As early as 1975 a picture of Kim Jong Il was placed next to the mandatory picture of his father in public spaces and homes. The propaganda began to describe his leadership style as one of benevolence and boldness. He was referred to as the respected and beloved general, even though there was strong evidence he had not received any formal military training. Kim Jong Il continued in his father’s footsteps, repeating the now well-known stories that revered them as a strong and heroic revolutionary family, and often idolizing other members of the family such as Kim Jong Il’s mother Kim Jong Suk. These pervasive stories frequently provide detailed accounts of the grand history of the entire Kim family and underscored that they were elite and destined to run the country.

The regime also began to make up new stories that stressed the fact that although his father was Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il did not enjoy a life of privilege. In fact, the propaganda claimed the exact opposite was true and

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8Ibid., 59.
10Ibid., 24.
emphasized that he never received special treatment, as noted below:

... in order to counter the assumption that the boy had an easy time growing up, the propaganda stresses that he was “born and bred in...difficult circumstances,” citing the death of his young mother as an example of his difficult life. Tales abound of his aversion to receiving special treatment and he is never shown simply enjoying himself. His clothes are simple and austere, usually a zip-up tunic and matching pants in a drab brown; unlike his father he never wears suits. Artists like to portray the youthful Kim Jong Il in solitude, often at a site associated with the anti-Japanese struggle, or looking on with a wistful smile as his father greets adoring citizens.\(^{11}\)

Kim Jong Il was known for his odd gray or brown outfits better suited to a member of the working class than the dictator of a country, and even wore these clothes when meeting with other heads of state. His hair was often unkempt. He wore sunglasses when not covering his eyes with dated, large rimmed spectacles. His awkward appearance caused many to ridicule and parody him outside of North Korea.

It is hard to know the real details regarding Kim Jong Il’s activities and immediate family members, but it seems throughout his life he fathered seven children with four different wives, had at least one serious girlfriend, and spent much of his time in his primary residence in a “palatial home outside the capital

of Pyongyang, with a racetrack, pools, and an artificial lake.”\textsuperscript{12} The lack of specificity about his private life and even photographs of his children would prove a topic of interest near the end of his life when confusion surrounded which of his sons would next assume power over the regime due to his unexpected death.

No matter how little was really known about him, he left an omnipresent impression on society. He was constantly touring the country and was frequently photographed visiting factories, businesses, military bases, and attending cultural events. During these visits he was famous for his “on the spot” guidance. Unlike his father, it was extremely rare to ever see him on film and he never made public speeches; his voice was broadcast only once inside the country when he said, “Glory to the people’s heroic military,” at a rally in June 1992.\textsuperscript{13}

The Cult of Personality Begins

Characteristics and accomplishments previously attributed to Kim Il Sung began to be transferred to Kim Jong Il. For example, the new political slogan stated, “Kim Il Sung is Kim Jong Il,” and Kim Jong Il frequently

\textsuperscript{12} Ramstad, “A Dictator Steeped in Myth.”

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
reminded the population he was ruling at the request of his father.\textsuperscript{14} He even assumed the parental role his father used in his own propaganda. While the phrase “Parent Leader” still refers only to Kim Il Sung but Kim Jong Il is often referred to as “mother.” For example, the following excerpt from a Korea Central News Agency document states:

Held together not by a mere bond between a leader and his warriors but by the family tie between a mother and her children, who share the same blood and breath, Korea will prosper forever. Let the imperialist enemies come at us with their nuclear weapons, for there is no power on earth that can defeat our strength and love and the power of our belief, which thanks to the blood bond between mother and child create a fortress of single-heartedness. Our Great Mother, General Kim Jong Il!\textsuperscript{15}

The references to him as a parental figure were meant lay the framework for the future and endear him as the necessary second leader of the innocent race. Simultaneously, this strategy was meant to prevent any uprising or dissent in response to Kim Il Sung’s passing. It worked, and the same tactics would be applied in the future upon Kim Jong Il’s eventual death and the next transition. Peter Beck, a Korea specialist based in Seoul, notes that, “Having Kim Jong Un's father and grandfather portrayed as gods is important for a regime based

\textsuperscript{14}Myers, \textit{The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves And Why It Matters}, 103.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 126.
on hereditary rule. Legitimacy comes from his forefathers. Kim Jong Un's father and grandfather may be dead, but he embodies their essence.”

The question remains, did all the travails of the propaganda machine actually achieve what it set out to do? Do Kim Il Sung’s successors embody his “essence?” It would appear the regime’s efforts to demonstrate this have failed in a sense, because Kim Jong Il never enjoyed the level of popularity and love that his father earned from the people. This can be attributed to his physical appearance as explained previously, but in addition to the perception of “his father as the greater of the two men because of the power of the national liberation myth and the higher living standard North Koreans enjoyed under his rule.” In fact, scholars claim that it was probably helpful for Kim Il Sung’s legacy that he passed away when he did. The inevitable severe economic decline of the country would have ruined his reputation as a great and prosperous leader. The Soviet Union ended subsidies on oil in the 1970’s which began a period of hardship that extended into the 1980’s and 1990’s,

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further exacerbated by the collapse of the USSR and more decreases in economic aid from both Russia and China. The regime parlayed these setbacks into Kim Il Sung’s much-propagandized efforts to cut ties with both countries in accordance with Juche principles. The economy continued to struggle under Kim Jong Il, who was left without much of foreign the aid that had sustained the country for 40 years, and culminated in a severe famine from 1996-1999 that reportedly left 600,000 to 900,000 people dead and an entire generation of children malnourished. This event, also referred to as the Arduous March, seemed to offer retroactive proof that Kim Il Sung had provided much better for his people during his rule than his son.

However, the regime could not allow Kim Jong Il to be blamed for the current hard times and “the propaganda apparatus was so significant that it was one of the few North Korean institutions that did not miss a beat even during


19 Ibid.

the catastrophic starvation of the 1990’s.” An excerpt from “Transition” by North Korean writer Pak Il-Myong from June 1999, one of several short propaganda stories, highlights the reasons for his hardships:

It had been a hard year. The continuation of the imperialists’ political and economic blockade, and, on the world’s stage, war and strife, starvation and extreme poverty, historically unprecedented oppression threatening all mankind – it had been a year in which these things had enveloped the earth like a black cloud.

The black cloud symbolized the dark times and this type of symbolism is even carried over into the depiction of Kim Jong Il in the arts. In contrast with his father, who was often pictured with blue skies and sunshine, he was more often shown standing on the shore with waves pounding against rocks or in other inclement weather in order to enforce that his rule was much more challenging than what his father faced. The propaganda continued to place blame on the “imperialists,” namely South Korea and the U.S. This only reiterates that when policies call for sanctions against North Korea, for instance for its nuclear program, the government reinforces its claims that life is hard in the country because of the actions of hostile outside parties.


22Myers, The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves And Why It Matters, 120.

23Ibid., 120.
The Son’s Personality and Leadership Style

It would be a simplification to write Kim Jong Il off as an eccentric. Many Korea experts assumed his policies and leadership style would eventually lead to the demise of the Kim dynasty. However, Kim’s calculating, power-driven mind should not be underestimated. Even U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright remarked upon meeting him that he was “smart” and “well-informed,” although she added that, “one could not preside over a system as cruel as [North Korea’s] without being cruel oneself.”

Although Kim seemed to make rational decisions to maintain his regime, it is unlikely that he believed the propaganda claiming his country was perfect and flourishing when it so obviously was not. In fact, Hassig and Oh note, “Kim saw the flaws in socialism, yet was unwilling to reform the system. Rather, he turned time and again to ideological indoctrination. Did he believe North Korea’s problems could be solved with more propaganda? Quite possibly, he did.” He seemed capable of weighing the pros and cons of decision making and employed North Korea’s limited resources to protect his

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24 Ramstad, “A Dictator Steeped in Myth.”

25 Hassig and Oh, North Korea: Through the Looking Glass, 96.
regime at all costs,\textsuperscript{26} but ultimately his power and comfort were more important to him than anything else.

**His Transition: A Continual Work in Progress**

Kim Jong Il could never completely eliminate mention of his father without adversely affecting his own national myth, but he did attempt to lower his father’s profile. An indication of this is that the mention of Kim Il Sung in the North Korean press declined during the years Kim Jong Il remained in power. A further example is the traditional New Year’s Day message, in which the repetition of Kim Il Sung’s name had fell to fewer than six times since 2000, as compared to about 25 times in the last years of his life.\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, propagandists began to make bold statements in rewriting Kim Jong Il’s biography. For instance, by 2002 North Korean radio claimed that, “Great Comrade Kim Jong Il already earned the people’s admiration as early as the 1940’s and the 1950’s of the last century. He spearheaded our people’s struggle to complete the Juche cause, undertaking all the heavy tasks of the revolution all by himself from the 1960’s to the 1990’s.”\textsuperscript{28} Given that the

\textsuperscript{26}Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom*, 62.

\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid.
younger Kim was officially born in 1942, the propaganda was blatantly exaggerating the nature of his rise to power.

Elites and Military: Kim’s Military “Work”

Kim Jong Il did not have the military experience of his father and therefore lacked the necessary skills to lead a nation with a military first policy. Still, several tall tales were propagated about how he helped his father plan battles during the Korean War to make up for Kim’s non-existent military experience. At the age of eleven, it was claimed, he would stay up all night and help map out military operations and strategies on how to best thwart the enemy while absorbing Kim Il Sung’s incredible military prowess.29 An adolescent hardly has the capability to map out complex military procedures, but presenting the son in this manner ensured that no one could outwardly question his military experience. When he was eighteen, he supposedly formulated the military first policy when on a visit to a base.

An important aspect of Kim Jong Il’s power was the prominence and complete submission of the political elites and the military. Under his rule the Korean People’s Army was significantly built up and today includes naval, air force, and special forces, and is estimated to number 1.2 million members

29Ibid., 56.
compared with South Korea’s 700,000. This could become problematic for South Korea should the North decide to invade again. The U.S. has served as a deterrent because of its military presence, but should the U.S. ever pull forces out of South Korea it is impossible to know if it would embolden military action from the North.

Kim ensured the political elites and the military remained under his command by routinely spying on them and lavishing the members of both with significant advantages such as better access to food and jobs, and even a large portion of the national budget. At the same time, offenders and often their entire families were either executed or sent to prison camps. It is currently believed as follows:

the extensive system of prison camps hold between 150,000 and 200,000 political prisoners alone, and the North Korean regime is responsible for untold numbers of disappearances. According to defector reports, individuals suspected of political crimes are often taken from their

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30 Hassig and Oh, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, 105.


32 Ibid.
homes by state security officials late at night and sent directly, without trial, to work camps.\(^{33}\)

There are several first-hand accounts of these brutal concentration camps and a few defectors have written memoirs about their atrocious experiences.

The military has an overwhelming power and presence in North Korea and is employed not only for defense but also aids in maintaining social control. Weapons of mass destruction and a strong military have been considered by many to be the backbone of North Korean foreign policy.\(^{34}\) It is likely that Kim believed his superior military gave him bargaining power on the world stage and made him a force to be reckoned with from foreign countries, as well as intimidated South Korea.

The largest cracks in Kim Jong Il’s propaganda are in the elite and military groups. Stories about his impoverished lifestyle may have been believed by some of the working class in North Korea, but the elites and military generals in Pyongyang were surely aware of his capitalistic ways.\(^{35}\) It


\(^{34}\)Hassig and Oh, North Korea: Through the Looking Glass, 111.

\(^{35}\)Hassig and Oh, The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom, 63.
seems as though the poor populace suffering from almost permanent food shortages also was aware their chubby leader was not living the life he claimed. However, due to his control measures on all segments of society an uprising of the North Korean people was not to be expected during his rule.

Rumors about His Demise Begin

The outside world was always on the lookout for signs of Kim Jong Il’s demise. The first rumors that he had suffered a stroke began in September 2008 when he did not attend a highly publicized military parade celebrating the country’s sixtieth anniversary. The world eagerly awaited photographic evidence that the dictator was still alive because reports began to intensify that he had already died. Myers notes that eventually photos were released that revealed Kim was not dead or totally incapacitated, but was still alive.

. . . the pudgy, expansively gesticulating General of old had given way to a thin, slack-faced man with one gloved hand hooked awkwardly in the pocket of his jacket. The propaganda apparatus had evidently concluded that offering visual evidence of a stroke was better than letting the world run riot with rumors of an even more subversive nature, but the decision cannot have been an easy one.”

Much in the same manner that his father’s unsightly goiter had been hidden from the people, the regime tried to hide the he was not in good health, but the

\[\text{36} \text{ Myers, } \text{The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves And Why It Matters, 63.} \]

\[\text{37} \text{ Ibid., 63-4.} \]
physical evidence was obvious. The reactions of North Koreans to their leader’s condition are not well documented, but surely the public was aware of the leader’s ailing health.

The Dear Leader Passes Away

The exact status of Kim’s health was unknown both inside and outside the country, but the Dear Leader held on to his regime a few years longer. Finally, on December 17, 2011 the state media announced that he had died at age 69 “from great mental and physical strain.” North Korean state television reported that he had apparently suffered a heart attack during a train ride on his way to deliver more “on the spot” guidance. His death gained immediate worldwide attention as well as concern over what would happen next in the country. The North Korean media coverage that followed the announcement of his passing displayed a population in a state of shock and extreme sadness, and attracted global attention. North Koreans were seen “shouting, screaming and weeping in the streets, hysterically mourning Kim Jong Il’s death. One video


shows them lined up in the streets, in a seemingly-choreographed mourning process, with others pounding their fists on the ground in agony.” To some foreigners, the images appeared to show staged emotion.

The regime did not waste any time in propagandizing Kim’s death. Even nature was used to show the sorrow of both heaven and earth over his passing. The official media released statements regarding a mysterious glow over the revered Mount Paektu, and a crane flew around a statue of the leader three times in mourning. The state media released statements very soon after his death about the allegiance of the people to his son Kim Jong Un. For example, an article stated, “The army and people of the DPRK will weather the present difficulties by overcoming sorrow and displaying fresh strength and courage and struggle more staunchly for the great victory of the Juche revolution under the leadership of Kim Jong Un.” Another report had the


following headline, “Kim Jong Un Is Mental Mainstay of Korean People.”

Kim Jong Il’s death highlighted many worries about the future of the Korean peninsula. South Korea was particularly concerned about stability and the possibility that about 24 million refugees could flee south were the North Korean economy to collapse. The White House issued a statement following the Dear Leader’s death, reiterating its commitment to stability on the peninsula and in support of its allies. Theories of a North Korean collapse or revolution were rampant, as well as of possible military attacks on South Korea. It was unknown if there were other key players that would vie for power within the regime or if Kim Jong Un would be viewed as too young and inexperienced to take the helm. A perceived power vacuum was in place and it left the world watching and waiting for news on anything happening inside the secretive country. As time passed it became apparent that the regime was definitely transitioning to the leadership of Kim Jong Un. Whether the regime would be

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able to maintain the propaganda influence and tight social and ideological control under the new leader remained to be seen.
CHAPTER V
THE NEXT KIM SUCCESSOR: KIM JONG UN

The first power transition of the regime led to the question of whether another Kim heir would take over once Kim Jong Il became incapacitated or died, and there had been much speculation around who would become the next leader of North Korea. It was widely believed that Kim Jong Il’s third and youngest son Kim Jong Un would be his successor and the world saw this speculation confirmed. We were witnessing a different kind of succession process, but nevertheless propaganda would continue to be a core tenet used by the newest leader to ensure the stability of his transition process by channeling his grandfather, while attempting to rebrand the image of North Korea in a more modern way. True to form, foreign powers continued their policies of non-engagement in this internal Korean process.

The transition of power to Kim Jong Un seemed to go against Confucianism, which would logically designate Kim’s oldest son Kim Jong Nam to succeed him. Kim Jong Nam was born in 1971 and was reportedly favored as the successor until he was detained by authorities for attempting to enter Japan on a forged passport. He was deported back to North Korea and
later lived in exile in Macau.¹ His behavior caused embarrassment to Kim Jong II, leading the regime to begin to favor then twenty-six-year-old Kim Jong Un. According to Korea expert Han Pak, the two older siblings did not seem to be suitable candidates because one was viewed as a spoiled world traveler and the other was been deemed too effeminate to successfully lead the country.² “On the other hand, Kim Jong Un, despite his relative inexperience, at least was said to possess masculine character traits and an unblemished personal history upon which a cult of personality and charisma could be built.”³ His age and lack of experience seemed to have left him out of the running as the next successor, especially because would not have the advantage of the lengthy process Kim Jong Il underwent before he assumed leadership.⁴ Little was known about him; not even photographs were readily available, and at first it was not public knowledge that he was even Kim Jong Il’s son. It is probably still not common

¹Hassig and Oh, The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom, 61.


³Ibid.

knowledge that he is the second son of Kim Jong Il’s third wife Ko Yonghui.⁵
There are even discrepancies regarding his actual birthdate. It is widely believed he was born on January 8, 1983, but the official propaganda claims he was born in 1982 in order “to both age him a bit and to line up his date with the official birth years of his father and grandfather, 1942 and 1912 respectively.”⁶ However, soon enough the son began accompanying his father to high profile events in Pyongyang such as a military parade, for the first time shown live by foreign broadcasters.⁷

Despite the lack of knowledge about him, those familiar with North Korean propaganda began to notice subtle signs indicating Kim Jong Un was aiming to assume the leadership of his country as many as four years ago. For example, in 2008 a song was released “glorifying a ‘General Kim’ whose vigorous stride (so the lyric went) was making the very rivers and mountains rejoice. That this General was not Kim Jong Il, whose name is invariably invoked in full, was clear enough; ergo the poem’s subject had to be the

⁵Myers, The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves And Why It Matters, 64.

⁶Ibid., 67-8.

successor to the throne.”⁸ The regime was beginning to build up Kim Jong Un, but the lack of a propaganda onslaught around this time suggests Kim Jong Il was not aware his successor would take his post over so soon.

His Physical Appearance

It will likely bode well for Kim Jung Un that, unlike his father, he looks like his grandfather. The press noted that the “rotund young man has an uncanny physical resemblance to his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea. Jowls, smile, posture, tunic, haircut – all nearly identical, right down to the dainty and perfunctory way he clapped his hands.”⁹ Korean expert Myers reports seeing roadside signs in June 2011 reading “Blessed with a Marshal, Blessed with a Leader, Blessed with a General.” He notes that the interesting part of these signs was not that the Leader part (i.e. Kim Il Sung) is centered and larger than the other two, but that the words Marshal and General are the same size, indicating that Kim Jong Un’s status is equal to that of his father.¹⁰


⁹McDonald, “Low Profile of Heir Reinforces a Mystery.”

Apparently in order to compensate for Kim Jong Un’s young age and lack of military experience, he was given the rank of four-star general in September 2010, only hours before a rare North Korean Workers’ Party conference. This conference served as the formal introduction of Kim Jong Un to North Korea and the rest of the world. During the meeting he was named a member of the Central Committee and also received the impressive title of vice chairman of the party’s Central Military Commission, one of the many indications that propaganda about him was also particularly intense in the military during this time.

The rush to create a cult of personality for his son may have been directly related to Kim Jong Il’s rapidly deteriorating health condition, which brought the succession process to the forefront of internal politics much more


13McDonald, “Low Profile of Heir Reinforces a Mystery.”
quickly than during the transition from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il.\textsuperscript{14}

As the process of Kim Jong Il’s succession demonstrated, the transition of power from Kim Il Sung to his son was remarkably gradual and deliberate and the successor’s legitimacy was cemented by his presumed ability, experience, and knowledge rather than solely through his blood line. The late Kim had always praised his son for his brilliance, wisdom, and exceptional leadership skills, and prepared him to run the country based on these qualities.\textsuperscript{15}

While Kim Jong Un did not enjoy the years of build up used to prop up his father, the regime is now working steadily to catch up and promote him from the inside. BBC Monitoring notes that the media coverage of this new type of succession process passed through several stages. In the beginning stage when a sorrowful nation was mourning the death of Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un began to be referred to as the “mental mainstay of the Korean people, our sagacious leader” and “supreme leader” by KCNA. The next phase, the consolidation phase, was marked by the praising of his abilities, such as his loyalty and leadership skills. North Korea media emphasized his glorious heredity, frequently mentioning the “wise leadership of Kim Jong Un, who is identical to the great leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.” In the final stage Kim Jong Un firmed up his grip on power in North Korea by making public

\textsuperscript{14}Hassig and Oh, \textit{The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom}, 61.

\textsuperscript{15}Park, “Succession in North Korea.”
appearances, engaging in activities, inspecting military training units and offering field guidance at factories. He had fully taken on his father’s duties and was even delivering his own version of the famed “on the spot” guidance.

According to North East Asia Deputy Project Director for the Crisis Group Daniel Pinkston, who recently visited North Korea, “The amount of propaganda that had gone up in billboards and signs all over the country was astonishing given the fact that people told me in April there was none. In two months’ time, they were able to extend this large-scale propaganda message.”

In addition, another song was released that glorified the new leader titled “Onward Toward the Final Victory” and was reportedly aired on radio and television several times a day. Vice-minister of culture Hong Kwang Sun told KCNA, "The song is just a powerful trumpet call of the revolution encouraging the army and people in the drive to build a thriving nation as well as a stirring

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The Importance of Foreign Support in Order to Retain Leadership

Domestic support will be an essential part of Kim Jong Un’s ability to stay in power. But he must also gain international legitimacy, most importantly from China. At present it seems that China will continue to approve of him in his new role and provide aid to the country. Shortly after Kim Jong Un’s designation as general, the North Korean media published a message from China’s president Hu Jintao, in which he stressed the following:

...deep and traditional friendship, close geographical relationship, and wide-ranging common interests of the two countries, and pledged to defend and promote the bilateral relationship, always holding fast to it in a strategic view under the long term discernment no matter how the international situation may change.19

China has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in North Korea because the country’s economic collapse could result in a flood of refugees. Reportedly, Kim Jong Un’s has sent more officials and workers to China, both to bring in revenue but also to learn from the Chinese economic system.20

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19Ruediger, “Power Restructuring in North Korea: Anointing Kim Jong II’s Successor.”
The new leader is attempting to shore up support in other countries, looking for potential allies everywhere. North Korean senior officials have visited several countries, including China, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Laos, and Myanmar in search of better relations and economic support.21 Yoo Ho-yeol, a North Korean expert and professor at Korea University in Seoul, has stated that “support from the international community and economic assistance from the outside world are essential for North Korea’s new leader to maintain his regime.”22

Internal Acts for Power and Influence

While sending delegations to other countries, Kim Jong Un is making the rounds in North Korea to establish his popularity and portray himself as possibly a new type of Kim leader. While Kim Jong Il never made public

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22Ibid.
speeches, Kim Jong Un has already given two televised addresses this year.\textsuperscript{23}
He spoke at a children’s youth rally of 20,000 in June 2012, his second public appearance since taking over the regime in December 2011.\textsuperscript{24} The rally lasted for six days at Pyongyang’s Kim Il Sung Stadium.\textsuperscript{25}

Kim Jong Un gained international exposure for his apparent recent marriage. A little-known North Korean woman was seen accompanying him amid much speculation before the regime revealed she was his wife. The propaganda apparatus claimed he married twenty-three-year-old Ri Sol Ju in 2009,\textsuperscript{26} and the new first lady of North Korea has made frequent public appearances with her husband since she was first noticed in July. Since then


\textsuperscript{25}Ibid.

Kim Jong Un has made 23 public appearances and she has accompanied him to 15 of them.  

Ri Sol Ju is not the typical North Korean wife. She favors western-style clothing and has looks chic and polished on camera. Neither Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong II were ever pictured with their spouses in public, which confirms Kim Jong Un’s attempt at a more relaxed, outgoing, and informal style of leadership. Analysts believe his marriage is intended to give him some credibility despite his young age, and to show that he is a responsible head of a family with a wife reportedly completing a six-month course at Kim Il Sung University on the duties of a first lady.

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
There is speculation that Ri Sol Ju, hoping to reshape the face of the regime behind the scenes, may have played a role in another very high profile event that was unusual and uncharacteristic of the regime: the use of unauthorized Disney characters at a recent concert, interwoven with traditional songs and costumes, marking the first time Disney characters have been shown at sanctioned events. It is possible the regime will continue to display other well known Western brands to continue to modernize its image. According to Mok Yong Jae at DailyNK, this event does not necessarily mean the country “will liberalize, abandon its nuclear weapons, or rejoin the international community. For now, Kim is resorting to purely cosmetic changes and the propaganda strategy of manipulating public opinion through art.”

An article by the Korean Central News Agency noted that the performance is part of a “grandiose plan to bring a dramatic turn in the field of

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literature and arts this year.” Another part of the image reformation has been the modernization of Pyongyang, noted by diplomats and academics who recently visited the country, probably in response to Kim Jong Un’s proclamations that he will improve the standard of living. However, a recent article citing rare interviews with four North Koreans currently staying in the Chinese border area noted that their lives have not improved under the new leader and felt their lives had indeed become harder, citing a rise in food prices among other hardships.

South Korea Reaction and North Korean Military Actions

Despite the lack of information on North Korea, the South Korean media had much commentary about the current changes, attacking the aforementioned youth rally as “a political show” with one newspaper comparing it to Hitler


37 Ibid.
Youth rallies during the Nazi era in Germany.\textsuperscript{38} The North Korean military threatened to fire at specific South Korea media outlets for these remarks and also threatened a “merciless sacred war” if Seoul did not apologize for what it called a “vicious smear campaign.”\textsuperscript{39} Such acrimonious exchanges between the two Korea complicate the situation on the peninsula where tensions are still running high in both countries since North Korea’s most recent rocket launch in April 2012. This particular launch was highly publicized because it was meant to honor Kim Il Sung’s 100th birthday, and it failed to reach orbit. Despite unsuccessful rocket launches touted to the populace as triumphs in the past, Kim Jong Un broke with tradition in a new way and admitted the failure to the public in an unprecedented media statement.\textsuperscript{40} The U.S. and South Korea, among other nations, believed the launch was a test for long-range missile technology, but North Korea insists the rocket was meant for an observational

\textsuperscript{38}CBS News, “North Korea leader Kim Jong Un tries to win over new generation with youth rally speech.”


The discord between both countries has ebbed and flowed throughout the years but North Korea has been threatening South Korea more frequently since the death of Kim Jong Il. This is perhaps propaganda to show that Kim Jong Un is a powerful leader who is not afraid to threaten serious measures against South Korea, much as his father frequently used to do.

The much publicized tense relations with South Korea has prompted many to question whether Kim Jong Un has been involved in provocations against his country’s southern neighbor in order to help establish his legitimacy at home. Some scholars believe that he may have concocted the North Korean shelling of a South Korean island called Yeonpyeong in November 2010. Should South Korea be ready for more attacks from the North as Kim Jong Un continues to establish himself and his credibility, and can he be tied to other provocations? An examination of past military incidents between North and South Korea reveals the Kim regime may have been attempting to do just that.

It has been noted there is a correlation between Kim Jong Un’s rise to power and recent military tensions between the two Koreas. The main actions and following retaliations stem from a November 2009 “naval transgression of

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42 McDonald, “Low Profile of Heir Reinforces a Mystery.”
the maritime border in the Yellow Sea. The South got the better of this clash and sent the intruding ship back across the Northern Limit Line in flames.” Many believed the North Korean military would retaliate soon after. This occurred on March 26, 2010 as the South Korean ship, the Cheonan, was hit by a torpedo just south of the maritime border in the Yellow Sea resulting in the death of 46 sailors. Many believed the North committed the attack; however “South Korea refrained from calling for retaliation against the North and instead urged Pyongyang to make a public apology for its ‘mistake.’” The unwillingness of South Korea to respond militarily plays very well into the domestic propaganda that Kim Jong Un is a feared leader who is not intimidated by opposing armies. According to B. R. Myers, since North Korea did not suffer any consequences for the Cheonan sinking, it is likely the regime felt even more emboldened to continue establishing Kim Jong Un’s legitimacy through military acts:

The military first regime may well have concluded that it had nothing to lose and everything to gain – i.e., an enhancement of its prestige at home and a further weakening of the “Yankee colony” – by engaging in another act of aggression. On November 23, 2010, after lodging a

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44 Ibid., 66-7.

routine protest against equally routine South Korean firing exercises near the Northern Limit Line, the North launched an artillery attack from a coastal base against Yonpyong island just south of the disputed maritime border. The South’s troops, whose howitzers had been pointed in a southwesterly direction, were able to return fire only after a disastrous delay. The shelling devastated the island, killing two South Korean soldiers and two civilians.46

Myers goes on to note that the South Korean public reacted more angrily to this belligerence than it had to the sinking of the Cheonan but again quickly calmed down. This pattern of behavior again plays very well into the party’s propaganda line yet also sets a dangerous precedent for future military actions that could eventually lead to attacks on U.S. interests or bases in South Korea. There is no telling what the North Korean regime will do to continue to prop up their new leader while simultaneously touting its military prowess over South Korea and possession of nuclear weapons.

The Kim Cult Will Continue

Kim Jong Il continued the propaganda and cult of personality around his next successor in order to maintain the control and indoctrination of the North Korean people.47 As long as a member of the Kim regime is in power it is unlikely the plight of the North Korean people will change. The people have no political power and although they may not ever support Kim Jong Un the

46Ibid., 68-9.

way they supported his grandfather, it is again unlikely they will outwardly oppose him. The situation could be very similar to what we witnessed with Kim Jong Il. He was not the “respected and beloved general” the propaganda made him out to be, but in the Confucian-based culture in North Korea he was accepted as the leader because he was the first son of the respected and beloved father.\(^{48}\) Even though Kim Jong Un is not his first son, it is very likely the North Koreans will continue to accept the propaganda and Kim Jong Un as their leader. After spending a half century under the ruling Kim dynasty the population probably cannot imagine anything different in their lives.\(^ {49}\)

The Kims will remain in power as long as the populace is constantly worried about making ends meet, finding adequate food, and fearing the police; with these priorities it will always be too scared or weak to oppose or protest the power of the regime.\(^ {50}\) Kim Jong Un is already following in the carefully planned propaganda footsteps of the Kim dynasty. North Korea state news media has continually underscored Kim Jong Un’s dedication to his father’s “military first” policy, suggesting he will retain the internal loyalty of the


\(^{49}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 63.
elites. He will also continue to use the Juche ideology to reinforce the regime’s power. There are no indications that anyone or anything will question him as the source of all political authority which means he could very well remain in power until the end of his own life. True to the Kim family tradition in a society venerating parental authority, he will continue to use propaganda and uphold the social control measures, no matter how “modernized,” to ensure a smooth transition of power.

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52Park, “Succession in North Korea.”
CONCLUSION

Propaganda has been an instrument paramount to the survivability and longevity of the Kim regime in North Korea. It continues to influence and shape the ideas and opinions of the population. It indoctrinates citizens by playing upon their own prejudices and nationalist emotions that regard their race as unique, virtuous, innocent, and childlike while simultaneously appealing to their unique blend of communist, Japanese, and Chinese cultural roots.

The strict social control measures in place, combined with the closed information environment, will continue to limit North Korean citizens’ exposure to the outside world and leave them with no choice but an onslaught of propaganda in their daily lives. Propaganda is the news in North Korea, and the inability to access unbiased press, the internet, or to even call another country further inhibits the knowledge of the majority of the population. Any significant changes to the regime by Kim Jong Un will probably be superficial. Its aim may be to rebrand the country as “modern” but it will not change the core nature of the regime.

This totalitarian, regimented, and secretive system will continue to use its elite members and the military to its advantage by providing them with privileges and a higher standard of living. The regime has staying power,
surviving the fall of Soviet communism and immune of the demands for change seen in recent years in the Middle East, stimulated in part by access to new social media not available in North Korea.

The three Kim leaders are different in their own way but their propaganda remains fundamentally unchanged. The main goal to stay in power has always been at the forefront of their every move. Their propaganda tactic has been, and continues to be, to change the past, exaggerate or completely make up their accomplishments, vilify other nations, and indoctrinate and subjugate their population in order to wield sole power over the country.

The regime’s propaganda will continue to provide insights into the direction it is taking on key issues such as nuclear weapons. The world will continue to watch and wait for a change for the better in North Korea. The most recent hope for a shift away from the regime was an unstable succession process predicated on Kim Jong Il’s death. If Kim Jong Un maintains the propaganda and control environment currently in place and continues to make policy decisions with the aim of maintaining power and if he can avoid a palace coup or an unlikely popular uprising, it will not be surprising if his future son becomes the fourth leader of the Kim regime in North Korea.
APPENDIX: Chronology of Key Events in North Korea, 1945 – Present

Kim Il Sung’s Rule

1945 - World War II and Japanese occupation of Korea ends with Soviet troops occupying the north and U.S. troops the south, divided by the 38th parallel or the Demilitarized Zone.

1946 – Soviet army installs Kim Il Sung as leader, North Korea's Communist Party, the Korean Workers' Party, inaugurated.


1953 - Armistice ends Korean War, which has cost two million lives.


1960s - Rapid industrial growth.

1980 - Kim Il Sung's son Kim Jong II, moves up party and political ladder, the economy begins to decline.

1992 - North Korea agrees to allow inspections by International Atomic Energy Agency, but over next two years refuses access to sites of suspected nuclear weapons production.

1994 - Death of Kim Il Sung. Kim Jong II succeeds him as leader, but doesn't take presidential title.

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Kim Jong Il’s Rule

1996 - Severe famine follows widespread floods. Pyongyang announces it will no longer abide by the armistice that ended the Korean War, and sends troops into the Demilitarized Zone.

1998 – Kim Jong Il’s power expands to encompass head of state. The late Kim Il Sung declared "eternal president." UN food aid brought in to help famine victims. North launches rocket which flies over Japan and lands in the Pacific Ocean and insists it fired a satellite, not a missile.

2000 - Summit in Pyongyang between Kim Jong Il and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung. North stops propaganda broadcasts against the South.

2001 - North Korea declares it is grappling with the worst spring drought of its history.

Nuclear Era

2002 January - U.S. President George W. Bush says North Korea is part of an "axis of evil", along with states such as Iraq and Iran. Pyongyang says President Bush has not stopped far short of declaring war.

June - North and South Korean naval vessels wage a gun battle in the Yellow Sea, the worst skirmish for three years.

October-December - Nuclear tensions mount. In October the U.S. says North Korea has admitted to having a secret weapons program. The U.S. decides to halt oil shipments to Pyongyang. In December North Korea begins to reactivate its Yongbyon reactor and international inspectors are thrown out.

2003 January - North Korea withdraws from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a key international agreement aimed at preventing the spread of atomic weapons.

July - Pyongyang says it has enough plutonium to start making nuclear bombs.
October - Pyongyang says it has reprocessed 8,000 nuclear fuel rods, obtaining enough material to make up to six nuclear bombs.

2005 February - Pyongyang says it has built nuclear weapons for self-defense.

2006 July - North Korea test-fires a long-range missile to an international outcry. Despite reportedly having the capability to hit the U.S. it crashes after take-off, according to U.S. officials.

October - North Korea claims to test a nuclear weapon for the first time.

2007 August - North Korea appeals for aid after devastating floods.

October - Pyongyang commits to disable three nuclear facilities and declare all its nuclear programs by year-end. The presidents of North and South Korea pledge at a Pyongyang summit to seek talks to formally end the Korean War.

November - North and South Korea's prime ministers meet for the first time in 15 years

Tensions Rise with South Korea

2008 February - South Korea's new conservative President Lee Myung-bak says aid to North conditional on nuclear disarmament and human rights progress.

March-April - North-South relations deteriorate sharply. North Korea test-fires short-range missiles and accuses President Lee Myung-bak of sending a warship into Northern waters.

July - Soldier shoots South Korean woman in a tourism area of North Korea, prompting further tensions. Foreign Minister Pak Ui Chun and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hold talks on Pyongyang's nuclear disarmament, the first meeting in four years.

September - North Korea accuses the U.S. of not fulfilling its part of disarmament-for-aid deal and says it is preparing to restart the Yongbyon reactor.
October - The U.S. removes North Korea from its list of countries which sponsor terrorism, in return for Pyongyang agreeing to provide full access to its nuclear sites.

December - Pyongyang says it will slow down work to dismantle its nuclear program in response to a U.S. decision to suspend energy aid following the breakdown of international talks to end the country's nuclear activities.

2009 April – Kim Jong Il attends parliamentary vote to re-elect him leader, in his first major state appearance since a suspected stroke in 2008. North Korea launches a rocket carrying a communications satellite but is accused of testing long-range missile technology. After criticism from the UN Security Council, North Korea walks out of international six-party talks aimed at ending its nuclear program.

May - North Korea says it successfully carried out its second underground nuclear test, drawing protests from the U.S., China, and Russia. Defense Secretary Robert Gates says U.S. "will not accept" a nuclear-armed North Korea. It also announces that it no longer considers itself bound by the terms of the 1953 truce that ended the war between the two Koreas.

June - North Korea sentences 2 U.S. journalists to 12 years hard labor for allegedly crossing the border illegally. U.S. President Bill Clinton visits to help secure their release in August. UN Security Council votes unanimously to impose tougher sanctions. Pyongyang responds by saying it will view any U.S.-led attempt to blockade the country as an "act of war" and that it plans to weaponize its plutonium stocks.

November - North Korea launches a confiscatory currency reform that causes disruption to private markets and unprecedented public protests.

2010 February - The government reportedly eases restrictions on private markets after the currency revaluation of 2009 wiped out many cash savings.

March - Sinking of South Korean warship Cheonan, allegedly by the North, raises tensions to new heights. U.S. announces new sanctions on North Korea in response.
September - Kim Jong Il's youngest son Kim Jong Un is appointed to senior political and military posts, fueling speculation that he is being prepared to succeed his father. U.S. President Obama signs the new sanctions into law.

November - North Korea reveals a new secretly-built facility for enriching uranium at its Yongbyon complex and causes alarm and anger in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo. Cross-border clash near disputed maritime border results in death of two South Korean marines, North Korea's military insists it did not open fire first and blames South Korea for the incident.

Kim Jong Un’s Rule

2011 December - Kim Jong Il dies. Kim Jong Un presides at his funeral, is named the "Great Successor" and becomes chairman of the National Defense Commission.

2012 February - Kim Jong Il is posthumously awarded the highest military title of Generalissimo - the same rank held by his father, Kim Il Sung. Army pledges loyalty to Kim Jong Un in a mass parade held to mark the 70th anniversary of Kim Jong Il's birth.

April - Kim Jong Un formally takes over ruling party leadership, becoming First Secretary of the Workers Party. The launch of a "rocket-mounted satellite" to mark the birthday of Kim Il Sung fails. Many believe it was another long-range missile test.

July - Army head Ri Yong Ho is removed from senior posts in the ruling party, and leader Kim Jong Un appoints himself to the highest rank of marshal.

August - The United Nations says North Korea has asked for urgent food aid after devastating floods in July.

October - Days after South Korea and the U.S. unveil a new missile deal, North Korea says it has missiles that can hit the U.S. mainland.
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