Kim Jong-un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

_In the Shadow of his Grandfather and Father_¹

Jerrold M. Post

“The child is the father of the man.”

One cannot understand the personality and political behavior of Kim Jong-un without placing them in the context of the life and leadership of his grandfather, Kim II-sung—North Korea’s first leader—and his father, Kim Jong-il. One of the difficulties in assessing the personality and political behavior of Kim Il-sung has always been discerning the man behind the myth. The gap between the available but sparse facts and the hagiographic portrait presented in North Korea is staggering. This extends to the gap between the facts of Kim Jong-il’s life and the mythic public presentation. Examining this gap is instructive as it may reflect areas of sensitivity, the ideal versus the real. Consider the following:

The Mangyongdae family is the greatest pride of our nation. From old times it is said that a great man is produced by a great family. There are many families in the world that produced great men. But there is not such a great family as Marshal Kim Jong-il’s family whose all members [sic] were famous as patriots, generation after generation. Marshal Kim Jong-il’s family is praised as the greatest family unprecedented in all countries and in all ages…The greatness of Marshal Kim Jong-il is related with the greatness of his family.²

Kim Il-sung was a man of heroic stature. The founding father of the modern state of North Korea, he was a guerilla fighter who rose to power under Stalin’s patronage and was named eternal president. He conceptualized the ideology of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), called _juche_, and the DPRK’s goal of reunifying

¹ This profile of Kim Jong-il is drawn in part from a profile of Kim Jong-il published in Jerrold M. Post, _Leaders and Followers in a Dangerous World_, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004).
Kim’s hold on power was absolute. Strongly influenced by Stalin and Mao, Kim Il-sung was a devoted communist. He established tight control over North Korea by crushing any opposition and eliminating potential rivals. Suspicious of outside intervention, Kim Il-sung closed the borders of his country, severely limiting not only the exit of his citizens, but also the influx of foreign visitors and foreign ideas.

Throughout the course of his life, Kim worked tirelessly to create a cult of personality that sustained him not only in life, but has continued to persist after his death. The Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Worker’s Party of Korea (KWP) has been devoted since its inception to furthering the image of Kim Il-sung and his family as loyal and fiercely patriotic Koreans. Known as the Great Leader, the near divine image of Kim Il-sung continues to influence North Korean policy, and the leadership decisions of his grandson. Indeed, Kim Il-sung was named Eternal President in the 1972 revision of the constitution; the slogan “The Great Leader Will Always Be With Us” is written in bold letters across the bottom of the DPRK website.

**Kim Jong-il, the Dear Leader: Unlike Father, Unlike Son**

But Kim Jong-il was unlike his father. Though Kim Jong-il was raised to succeed his charismatic father, there was almost no resemblance between the two. The son was not a heroic guerilla fighter, not the founder of his nation, and not an ideology conceptualizer. Rather, he inherited his charismatic image and the national ideologies of juche and reunification from his father. In his role as Director of the KWP, Kim Jong-il created the cult of personality around his father and attempted to strengthen the continuity between his father and himself. This myth of continuity made him captive to his father’s ideology.

For himself, Kim Jong-il created the myth of “the man from Mount Baekdu” when, in

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3 *juche*, a word of Kim Il-sung’s own construction, is a combination of two Korean words. The first *chu* means lord, master; the second, *che*, means the body, the whole. The concept *juche* signifies an intense need for independence and a desire to make one’s own decisions. It often appears with the suffix *song*, forming the word *juchesong*, meaning to act in accord with one’s own judgment. *Juche* was the most important political idea with which Kim Il-sung ruled the people. It pertains both to domestic and to international policy. Internationally, it signified the end of political dependence and subservience to the Soviet Union, and represented the elevation of Kim as a leader and political philosopher to the non-aligned world. See Suh, Dae-Sook. *Kim Il-sung: The North Korean Leader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988: 301. While *juche* grew out of Kim Il-sung’s personal experience, Korea as a nation had long struggled to establish its identity and independence from its surrounding great powers: Japan, China, and the Soviet Union. Internally, it meant to Kim forwarding the revolution on the basis of his own ideas, without slavishly following the precepts of Marxism. As Suh (302) notes, *juche* became the ideological system for North Korea, encompassing the idea of *chaju* (independence) in political work, *charip* (self-sustenance) in economic endeavors, and *chawi* (self-defense) in military affairs.
fact, he was “the boy from the Soviet Union,” having been born there in 1942. His first trip out of Korea was to the Soviet Union when he was fifteen. There are reports that he graduated from the Air Force Officers School in East Germany, but this is considered highly unlikely. Because of his lack of military credentials and experience, he had a great deal of insecurity in dealing with military matters and military officers.

“Majesty Sits Uncomfortably on his Shoulders”

Also unlike his father, Kim Jong-il grew up in luxurious surroundings, pampered and raised to be special. This is the formative recipe for a narcissistic personality, with a grandiose self-concept and a lack of empathy. Insofar as Kim Jong-il was in charge of the propaganda machine and directed the cult of personality around his father, he must have been particularly conscious of the gulf between his father’s mythological standing—one that he helped to create—and his own shortcomings. This disparity contributed to a lifelong sense of insecurity, so that “majesty sits uncomfortably on his shoulders.” It is always a challenge to succeed a powerful father. But to succeed a father of God-like stature is psychologically impossible. Moreover, being the son of God is very dangerous, as religious history tells us.

When Kim Jong-il was in his early thirties, his father began systematically preparing him for succession. While his father remained the public face of the KWP, Kim Jong-il worked behind the scenes, progressively increasing his influence and control. By grooming his son, Kim hoped to avoid in North Korea the same chaotic aftermath that followed both Stalin’s death in the Soviet Union and Mao’s demise in the People’s Republic of China. This would guarantee generational continuity and provide a basis not only for stability, but also for the “perpetuation of the system characteristics that tend[ed] to be unique and peculiar.”

It was during the 1970s that Kim Jong-II consolidated his position of power within the North Korean political system. Not tolerant of dissent, Kim “replaced thousands of officials at all levels of the party with younger members who would be personally loyal to him in gratitude for their promotion.” Kim worked assiduously to incorporate or eliminate his father’s peers, depending upon their support for his succession. By 1973, Kim Jong-il was named Secretary of the KWP, and in 1974 was named a full member of the Politburo. In that year, he announced the Ten Principles, which among other things required absolute loyalty to Kim Il-sung, but also cleverly reinforced the image of Kim Jong-il as fully aligned with his father and stressed the continuity between Kim Il-sung and his son.

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4 Mount Baekdu is the sacred mountain in Korea from which, according to myth, the Korea peninsula emerged.
5 Han S. Park, North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 149.
6 Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, North Korea Through the Looking Glass (Brookings Institute, 2001), 88.
The Heir Apparent, Fully in Charge

By the late 1970s, Kim Jong-il was, in effect, in charge of the DPRK—including the intelligence apparatus. This can be seen in three events that he is believed to have orchestrated: the 1978 kidnapping of South Korea’s leading actress, Madame Choe, and her director-producer husband; the 1983 bombing in Rangoon by DPRK commandos, which killed seventeen senior officials and narrowly missed the South Korean President; and the 1987 midair bombing of KAL Flight 858, which killed 115 people. These bold, even foolhardy, missions demonstrated that Kim Jong-il was in full control.

It was not until the 1990s that Kim Jong-il began to assume formal DPRK government positions. Because his lack of military experience was a concern at this time, the Propaganda and Agitation Department, where he began his Party career, began to fabricate a military background for the younger Kim. In addition, the Department of Propaganda and Agitation aimed to further enhance Kim Jong-il’s image as, not only the rightful leader of North Korea, but as an extension of his father.

He never took on the Presidency of North Korea, but rather maintained control and power through chairing the National Defense Commission. Instead, he designated his father President for Eternity. This can be characterized as an adroit political move, sparing him ultimate responsibility for policies that misfired, but it also suggests apprehension toward fully stepping into the giant shoes of his father.

While reportedly a micro-manager in most aspects of leadership, economic development was an exception. Recounting a conversation with his father, Kim Jong-il said:

The Leader, while alive, told me that I must never get involved in economic issues. If I get involved in the economic issues, I can never take part in the party’s activities or military activities. He said this to me over and over so that I do not forget the advice. He told me I must let party officials and the administration’s economic officials take charge of economic issues.

This quote, from a secret speech he gave to senior officials following an inspection tour of Kim Il-sung University in December 1996, reflects an artful shifting of responsibility for economic problems to his subordinates.

What is not entirely clear is the degree to which he was aware of the magnitude of his country’s economic difficulties. He was well aware of the South’s economic superiority, though he criticized the Republic of Korea (ROK), saying all that South Korean

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industry did was assemble parts imported from other countries. On the other hand, he frankly admitted that 60 percent of North Korean factories were not operating.9

**Kim Jong-il, Insecure About Personal Appearance and Stature**

Kim Jong-il, reportedly taking after his mother, was described as a short, overweight man who was very self-conscious about his appearance. Standing roughly five-feet-two-inches tall, Kim reportedly had platform shoes custom built to make him appear taller.10 Clearly, his short stature was a long-standing issue for him. Kang Myong-to, a son-in-law of [former] Premier Kang Song-san, recalled: “The elders of the village (Ch'ilgol, the hometown of Kim Jong-il's mother) called Kim Jong-il 'shorty.'” After eight years of house arrest, Madam Choe Un-hui, the South Korean actress he kidnapped, escaped. In her memoir, she recalled Kim's first words on meeting her. He reportedly said, “Well, Madame Choe, you must be surprised to see I resemble the droppings of a midget.”11 He wore only custom-tailored clothing made in Korea, and was rarely seen without his dark glasses. Although he chose to wear styles that were in keeping with North Korean society, the professionally tailored element of his wardrobe was apparent. He never appeared in public wearing a military uniform, likely because he was self-conscious about never having served.

**Hedonistic Life Style: A Vivid Contrast with Suffering of His Own Population**

Kim Jong-il lived an extremely hedonistic life. Both Kim's lack of empathy and sense of entitlement were evident in his indulgence, which contrasted with the struggle of most North Koreans to simply feed themselves. Kim lived in a lavish seven story pleasure palace in Pyongyang, and defector reporting indicates that Kim maintained villas in each of North Korea’s provinces and had them furnished with imported luxury goods. He is reported to have secreted upwards of $10 billion into Swiss bank accounts.12 According to the Hennessey Fine Spirits Corporation, for the decade from 1989 to 1999, his annual expenditure for their most expensive cognac, Paradis, which sells for about $630 a bottle, was between $650,000 and $800,000—similar to the annual income of a Korean peasant at $900-$1000 a year.13

He entertained frequently at his residences, hosting wild parties. These parties probably included entertainment provided by strippers and his “Joy Brigades,” which were

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12 Post, “Kim Jong-II of North Korea: In the Shadow of His Father,” 201.
comprised of beautiful young women trained to entertain him and his cronies. Members were reportedly recruited from junior high schools every July and had to be virgins with pale, unblemished skin. At these lavish parties, he drank heavily and expected those around him to do so as well. According to the memoirs of the South Korean actress Ch’oe Un-hui, Kim Jong-il drank as if he were a man who believed “the amount of liquor a man drinks shows how big a man he is.”

When in a benevolent mood, Kim Jong-il was known to lavish expensive gifts on guests and friends, ranging from televisions and stereos to bananas, pineapples, and mandarin oranges—all rare luxuries in North Korea. Kim appeared to maintain power both through such special perquisites, as well as through domination and fear. Defectors report that Kim’s manipulative style included alternating special privileges with humiliation and the threat of punishment, including execution. Stories abound of executions ordered by Kim, though there is no direct evidence. Some stories claim that Kim himself carried out executions—whether true or not, their persistence served to reinforce his image as a strongman.

The gap between the self-indulgent hedonistic lifestyle of Kim and his inner circle in Pyongyang and the privation of his people, including the lower-level military, was extreme. Because Kim regularly called for sacrifice from the Korean people in pursuit of the mission of reunification, news of his lavish lifestyle and that of his inner circle could significantly undermine his legitimacy.

Kim Jong-il was very concerned with appearances, and preferred to stay out of the public eye as much as possible; he was sometimes described as a recluse. In contrast with his father, who seemed at ease with large crowds and comfortable with people, Kim has been likened to the Wizard of Oz, “remaining out of sight, pulling levers from behind a screen.” He has rarely spoken in public; in fact, his “Glory to the heroic Korean People’s Army” speech, given at the end of a two-hour military display in 1992, was the first time that Kim is known to have done so. Even speeches aired on television and radio were read by narrators.

Malignant Narcissism

Indeed, the characteristics he displayed indicate that he had the core characteristics of the most dangerous personality disorder: “malignant narcissism.” This is characterized by:

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15 Post, “Kim Jong-II of North Korea: In the Shadow of His Father,” 201.
16 Ibid., 202.
18 “North Korea’s Likely New Leader Seen as Bizzare.”
• **Grandiosity and self-absorption, lack of ability to empathize with others.** This was reflected in his lack of empathy with his own people, as well his difficulties in understanding his principle adversaries: the United States, South Korea, and Japan. This trait can be associated with major political and military miscalculation.

• **No constraint of conscience.** Kim's only loyalty was to himself and his own survival.

• **Paranoid orientation.** Kim was always on guard and ready to be betrayed, because he saw himself as surrounded by enemies.

• **Unconstrained aggression.** Kim used whatever aggression he believed necessary, without qualms of conscience, eliminating individuals or striking out at a particular group.

Other characteristics of the narcissistic personality also contributed to flawed leadership performance and distorted decision-making. They include:

• Great insecurity and preoccupation with one’s own brilliance. Because of the need to be perfect, imparting new information to Kim proved difficult, as he reacted negatively to criticism.

• Extreme sensitivity to being slighted, and a tendency to surround oneself with sycophants who tell the leader what he wants to hear rather than what he needs to hear; out of touch with political reality.

• Optimism about one’s own chances and a tendency to underestimate the adversary.

• Words used instrumentally to accomplish whatever is seen as necessary; apparently sincere commitments are thus easily changed or disregarded (for example, violation of the Agreed Framework).

• Flawed interpersonal relationships because of a tendency to see another as the extension of the self with little capacity to appreciate their needs.

• Loyalty viewed as a one-way street. Moreover, individuals who are seen to be powerful in their own right are perceived as a threat and eliminated.

Since narcissistic individuals must be seen as perfect, when one of Kim’s plans misfired, the problem was never the concept, but the execution. Thus, Kim was ready to find a scapegoat whenever his plans did not work out.

**Implications for Decision-Making**

Decision-making in the DPRK was not by committee; Kim Jong-il had ultimate power. Although the exact structure in the military was unclear, it is believed that no military decision of any consequence was made without Kim Jong-il’s approval. It is unlikely that there was a free exchange of ideas, but shrewd advisers were able to get information to the Dear Leader and influence his opinions as long as they did not contradict his worldview.

Kim had only limited empathy with his own people, and he tolerated high levels of
death from famine. In confronting the famine, saving lives was not a top priority. Early on, Kim cut off nearly all food supplies to the four eastern provinces and denied these provinces access to international aid.\(^{19}\) During the famine, large numbers of deaths also occurred when several hundred thousand people were herded into displaced persons camps, where few survived the conditions.\(^{20}\) Moreover, according to the testimony of eyewitnesses, Kim ordered the systematic killing of babies born to political prisoners.\(^{21}\)

A revealing incident that he recalled with pride occurred during the last years of his father’s life, when his father remonstrated with him concerning the starving North Korean people:

> Only once have I disobeyed President Kim Il-sung. The President said, “Can you shave off some defense spending and divert it for the people’s livelihoods?” I responded, “I am afraid not. Given the military pressure from the United States, the Korean people must bear the hardship a little longer.” How much pain I felt at my failure to live up to the expectations of the President who is concerned about raising the living standards of the people!\(^{22}\)

**What Kim Values**

Kim Jong-il valued his safety, the survival of the regime, Pyongyang, personal wealth, elite support, and total domestic control. It can be presumed that Kim Jung-un shares these values.

**No Core Organizing Ideas or Principles**

Given that his position flowed from his identification with and succession to his father, Kim Jong-il could not appear to abandon the twin founding principles of the Republic: juche and the ultimate goal of Korean reunification. If we accept the premise that Kim Jong-il was only loyal to himself (and by necessity his inner circle), and that his survival and hold on power was his first priority, it should not be a surprise that he felt that his father’s core principles were subject to interpretation. He thus paid them lip service, while in reality modified them significantly. Like relationships, ideas are instrumental for the narcissist, and can be radically modified or discarded if no longer useful. While Kim Jong-il did not possess core organizing ideas or principles, he was in many ways a captive of his oft-declared public policy, for he frequently invoked the doctrines of juche and “reunification” to call for sacrifice on the part of the North Korean people.


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 73-74.


The Next Generation: Stroke Precipitates Appointment of Kim Jong-un as Successor

Given the careful manner in which Kim Il-sung prepared for his son’s succession, it is interesting to observe how Kim Jong-il ignored this issue until he suffered a major stroke in August 2008. This confrontation with his own mortality led him to hastily designate his third son, Kim Jong-un, as successor.

The aggressive, provocative acts by the DPRK at that time were probably designed to demonstrate the regime’s “toughness” and pave the way for the dynastic succession of Kim Jong-un. Unlike Kim Jong-il, who was designated successor some thirty years before his father’s death, Kim Jong-un was only designated successor after his father’s stroke.

Indeed, there had been great uncertainty as to who would succeed Kim Jong-il. The initial favorite of the Kim sons was the eldest Kim Jong-nam, who faced a great deal of public embarrassment in 2001 after being caught trying to enter Japan with a fake Dominican Republic passport in order to visit Tokyo’s Disneyland. Kim Jong-il’s second son, Kim Jong-chul, was reportedly passed over for being considered “too effeminate” (a euphemism for homosexuality).

Despite lacking military experience, Kim Jong-un was named four-star general in the People’s Army, Deputy Chairman of the Military Commission of the Workers’ Party, and member of the Party’s Central Committee in 2010. Kim Jong-un surely carries with him an acute awareness of his lack of military experience, a consequence of his father’s insecurity. At the same time, his sensitivity to this shortcoming likely makes him reject constructive criticism.

It is widely speculated that North Korea’s attack on the South Korean frigate that killed forty-six South Korean sailors in March 2010, and the later artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, were evidence that Kim Jong-il was helping to build the credentials of his son.

His father was well seasoned: while provocative actions have been taken for two decades, frequently accompanied by belligerent rhetoric, Kim Jong-il always showed restraint and pulled back from the brink. In vivid contrast, Kim Jong-un is unseasoned and inexperienced, and we cannot be confident of his wisdom and judgment. Especially with the changed climate in South Korea under President Park Geun-hye and widespread support in South Korea for a strong response to provocations, a significant possibility of one side or another precipitating conflict exists.

Recognizing his son’s youth and inexperience, Kim Jong-il appointed Choe Ryong-hae and his sister’s husband, Jang Songthaek, as co-regents. It is not clear how disabled Kim Jong-il was from his stroke in terms of his leadership functioning. What is clear is that Jang Songthaek was exercising close control over the leadership of Kim Jong-un, who increasingly resented him. When Kim Jong-il died at the end of 2011,
never having fully recovered from his stroke, the influence of the uncle began to decline. We can infer that Kim Jong-un was feeling increasingly confident and continued to resent the control of his uncle. Moreover, Jang became estranged from his wife, Kim’s aunt, who apparently accused him of forming a plot. Following the arrest and execution of Jang’s two deputies in November 2013, he was secretly detained until his staged public arrest and then execution in December of that year. Reports later emerged that, following the execution of his uncle, Kim Jong-un ordered the execution of Jang’s followers and extended family. He had now fully consolidated power with the elimination of any challenges or constraints on his leadership. The dramatic fall of Jang Song-thaek recalls a historic parallel: Kim Jong-il also purged his uncle in the mid-1970s, deeming him a threat to power.23

**Picking up the Nuclear Baton**

The first recorded nuclear test was in 2006, with Kim Jong-il fully in charge. The second test, which occurred in 2009 after Kim Jong-il’s stroke, may have represented the military’s commitment to a long-planned operation. Despite active warnings against another test by China, Russia, European nations, and the United States, the third test occurred in February 2013 after Kim Jong-il’s death, when Kim Jong-un was in place as his successor. This came after Jang Song-thaek’s influence began to decline at the end of 2012. Ongoing decisions about the nuclear program were now solely in the hands of Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un’s nuclear posturing is worrisome because he lacks the seasoning of his father, who always was able to pull back from the brink.

**The Third Generation**

The personality of Kim Jong-il has been presented in detail and can perhaps provide a model for how his son might behave. However, there has as of yet been little reporting on Kim Jong-un’s behavior. His boastful manner is worrisome, and it may be that he is a victim of his own propaganda. In particular, he may tend to overreact because of his underlying insecurities, and could underestimate President Park’s resolve.

Kim Jong-un was probably given training on how to rule by his father during the three years following his father’s stroke. However, little has been reported on the nature of interactions between father and son in the brief interval before his father’s death. Kim Jong-un would have been treated in the same manner by the inner circle as his father. Yet, just as Kim Jong-il purged his inner circle of those he did not trust when his father died, so Kim Jong-un stripped the leadership circle of those whose loyalty he doubted.

There is no reason to believe that Kim Jong-un shares his father’s insecurity about appearance, and he closely resembles his grandfather Kim Il-sung. The evidence thus

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shows a concerning lack of expertise in the broader realm of leadership. However, early indicators suggest that he is emulating the confrontational style of his father.

Jerrold M. Post is Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, Political Psychology and International Affairs and Founding Director of the Political Psychology Program at The George Washington University. He is the former director of the CIA Center for Analysis of Personality and Political Behavior. Dr. Post has published widely on crisis decision-making, leadership, on the psychology of political violence and terrorism, including his book Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior (Cornell University Press, 2004).