North Korea's Kim dynasty: the making of a personality cult

On former leader Kim Jong-il’s birthday, examines the way epic accounts of heroic feats formed a foundation for the totalitarian state

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In 1994, as it descended into famine, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) spent millions of dollars raising a ziggurat on top of the mausoleum of Tangun, the founder of the ancient Korean Kojoson dynasty. Despite other more pressing matters, the regime felt it had urgent reasons to commemorate the life of a man whose reign began in 2,333 BC.

Unlike later Korean kingdoms, Tangun’s capital was close to Pyongyang, not Seoul. And so, in 1994, as South Korea blazed ahead in the battle for economic and political legitimacy on the Korean peninsula, the North reached into the past to claim its own.

It was said Tangun’s father had come to earth from heaven near the holy Mount Paektu on North Korea’s border with China. And despite all evidence to the contrary, it was also claimed as the
birthplace of North Korea’s late leader Kim Jong-il, and its “founding father” Kim Il-sung’s base for his anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle.

When it came into being in 1948, official history writers dated Kim Il-sung’s Korea back to the year of his own birth. The now familiar Juche calendar, inaugurated in 1997, recalculated time from the year Kim Il-sung was said to have come to earth from heaven in 1912. Like some ancient creation myth newly minted, time itself began, or was renewed, with the birth of Kim Il-sung.

Equally importantly, in 1994 the renovation of Tangun’s Tomb coincided with another multi-million dollar renovation of the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, in which the embalmed body of Kim Il-sung would be displayed, preserving him as the country’s Eternal President.

To this day, the childhood hagiography of Kim Il-sung remains one of the key didactic tools of the North Korean state. The stories of his childhood resound from the walls of “Kim Il-sung Research Institutes” in schools, to the books children enjoy, to the texts electronically loaded on their Samjiyeon tablets.

He was born an ordinary man named Kim Song-ju on 15 April 1912, at the zenith of western and Japanese imperialism. In the first of his eight-volume memoir, he describes the era before his birth as a time of subjugation and national humiliation for the Korean race, and trumpets the new era of his guerrilla struggle.

Yet his birth also coincided with an omen of imperialism’s doom; it was the day the Titanic disappeared beneath the waters of the North Atlantic. In North Korea’s revolutionary cosmology, there is no such thing as chance. There is only destiny.

According to Kim Il-sung, his great-grandfather moved from North Jeolla Province, settling his family in Mangyongdae, then a village on the outskirts of the capital Pyongyang. For generations his family laboured there as farmers and grave keepers, and their suffering would come to symbolise the Korean nation under feudalism and Japanese imperialism. Kim describing them as “the epitome of the misfortune and distress that befell our people after they lost their country”.

In the memoir, Kim Il-sung’s childhood reminiscences lurch from affectations of modesty to statements of self-aggrandisement. In his preface, for example, the Great Leader claims: “I have
never considered my life to be extraordinary.” Two pages later he declares: “my whole life... is the epitome of the history of my country and my people.”

Kim even insists it was his own great-grandfather who led the attack on the General Sherman when it sailed the Taedong into Pyongyang in 1866, achieving one of Korea’s first great victories against western economic and military might. Kim’s ancestors glories foreshadow the greater ones to come.

The greatest influence upon the young Kim Il-sung is said to be his father, Kim Hyong-jik. A charismatic teacher and self-taught physician, Kim Hyong-jik becomes a prophetic figure in the history of his nation, raising an heir who will return as saviour to a liberated homeland.

Undated official photo of Kim Il-sung, his first wife, Kim Jong-suk, and his son Kim Jong-il. Photograph: Reuters

Kim Il-sung’s account says he prepared for his vocation from a tender age; he recalls vowing to defeat the forces of imperialism at the age of five, when he was playing on a swing in his mother’s arms. There could be no clearer distillation of North Korean children’s culture, rehearsed to this day via the Korean Children’s Union and military games in which toddlers and primary school students eviscerate effigies of American and Japanese imperialists. In the revolutionary imagination there is no difference between warriors and innocents.

He wrote himself into the history of the March 1st Movement of 1919, when Korean protests against Japanese imperial rule were violently crushed. “I, then six years old, also joined the ranks of demonstrators,” he says. “When the adults cheered for independence, I joined them. The enemy used swords and guns indiscriminately against the masses ... This was the day when I witnessed Korean blood being spilled for the first time. My young heart burned with indignation.”

From that point, the Kim family’s instinctive resistance to Japanese imperialism becomes increasingly bound to the political vision articulated by the Soviet Union. Kim Il-sung recalls his father’s realisation that “the national liberation movement in our country should shift from a nationalist movement to a communist movement.” Instead of bedtime stories of old Korea, his father teaches Kim of Lenin and the October Revolution.

In a series of semi-comic interludes, the young Kim Il-sung scores early victories against the enemy, setting the model for countless juvenile heroes in North Korean children’s literature. For
instance, he recalls “wrestling with a Japanese boy bigger than me who I got down with a belly throw.”

In other acts of resistance, Kim lines roads with spikes to tear the wheels of Japanese police bicycles, and defaces Japanese primary school textbooks in protest at linguistic imperialism. Such antics are undoubtedly exaggerated, yet the hagiography is careful to limit Kim Il-sung’s proto-guerrilla struggle to plausible feats of childhood derring-do. Unlike his son, Kim Jong-il, he is not depicted as a Napoleonic genius at 10 years-old.

Kim Hyong-jik does not live to see Korea free with his own eyes. Before he dies in exile in Manchuria, he issues a command to his now 14-year-old son: “You must not forget that you belong to the country and the people. You must win back your country at all costs, even if your bones are broken and your bodies are torn apart.”

Despite his father’s rousing words, Kim Il-sung is still too young to lead a guerrilla war that many North Koreans, until recently, could still recall from living memory. So before Kim’s war begins he studies in Manchuria, albeit in a middle school transformed into a kind of revolutionary Hogwarts.

Even today, the legend of Yuwen Middle School endures. During Kim Jong-il’s state visit to China in September 2010 he detoured to Jilin, undertaking a pilgrimage to his father’s school. There, according to state television, the Dear Leader became “immersed in thoughts while looking at the precious historic objects that contain the bodily odour of our Supreme Leader from his school years some 80 years back.” It was an exquisite act of political theatre. Only days later, returning to Pyongyang, Kim Jong-il revealed that Kim Jong-un would be his young successor.
However, in constructing a new mythology for Kim Jong-un, the state appears to be indulging the extravagances of his father’s own bloated biography, at a time when North Koreans are, more than ever, equipped to see through the holograms of power projected from Pyongyang.

In early 2013, the state disseminated a biography of its new young leader, The Childhood of Beloved and Venerated Leader, Kim Jong-un. According to a source from North Hamgyong Province, North Koreans were “anxious to read the new book following a blunder in another textbook” which was “withdrawn due to ‘distorted propaganda’”.

Kim Jong-un’s Childhood was said to have been withdrawn following criticism that it “distorted and exaggerated” the leader’s growing-up years. “The regime revised it so ordinary people could accept it,” sources said.

Despite this setback, the process of constructing Kim Jong-un’s childhood hagiography continues. In 2014, South Korean broadcaster KBS acquired a high school syllabus, revealing North Korean students had commenced a three-year course on the early life of Kim Jong-un.

Korean Central Television broadcast a documentary about the leader as a boy, while images of the sainted youth were projected as a backdrop to a concert of the Moranbong Band in Pyongyang. In a vision redolent of his father, Kim was presented wearing a miniature uniform of the Korean People’s Army, the documentary emphasising his “pistol marksmanship at the ripe age of three and his mastery of seven languages ... Kim discovered new geographical features ... when he was in his teens, and was a scholar of the achievements of famous generals from around the world.”
The message here is clear. Like his father and grandfather before him, Kim Jong-un has been blessed from childhood with a precocious intellect, messianic destiny, and a readiness to advance the revolution at the barrel of a gun.

What is the ultimate purpose of these claims? Korea expert Sonia Ryang, herself educated in in North Korean schools in Japan, suggests that Kim Il-sung, “is seen as the utmost form of existence that every North Korean is supposed to emulate (although everyone at the same time knows that it would not be possible to do so).” The state thus locates its citizens in a space of perpetual striving to meet an unattainable goal. Or, as high-profile defector Jang Jin-sung writes, “[O]ur General’s life is a continuous series of blessed miracles, incapable of being matched even by all our mortal lifetimes put together.”

This is undoubtedly true, pointing to the purpose of North Korea’s extravagant hagiography, whilst exposing the very nature of totalitarian control.

Jang Jin-sung’s book Dear Leader bears witness to the existence of a political and literary elite in Pyongyang, contriving such myths for mass consumption. These are not ancient holy texts whose authorship is lost in time. Indeed, if North Korean state mythology resembles elements of organised religion, it is more like Scientology, than Christianity or Islam. As Jang explains, the Great Leader’s own beloved memoir was, in fact, “compiled by a group of First Class novelists from the April 15 Literary Group,” a team of men “whose remit is the revolutionary history of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il”.

Indeed, many of the archetypal tropes of North Korean history were developed, not by scholars, but by novelists. And yet, as the scholar Andrei Lankov writes, “nobody in Korea would dare to suspend one’s disbelief when it comes to claims of the superhuman qualities of Kim’s family,” for fear of retribution.
Two of the most interesting reactions to the Sony film comedy The Interview attacked it for failing to understand that many, if not most, North Koreans are all too aware of their predicament, trapped between colliding forces of hagiography and history. As Jang Jin-sung says: “[I]t’s not that people really believe all this propaganda about Kim Jong-un, that he’s a God, and need someone to tell them otherwise or show them another way of thinking. North Koreans are people, and they aren’t stupid. In the North Korean system, you have to praise Kim and sing hymns about him and take it seriously, even if you think it’s only a shit narrative. That’s the block, you see? It’s not that people are brainwashed and think he’s God. These are things that people know, but that they don’t dare to challenge.”

Or, as Kim Joo-il simply complains, “in this movie it looks like we are too stupid to realise our government is bad.”

In the past, perhaps, it was different. Writer Kang Chol-hwan remembers how, “during my childhood, Kim Il-sung had been like a God to me”. Defector Park Yeon-mi has even admitted that, as a child, “I had to be careful of my thoughts because I believed Kim Jong-il could read my mind.”

Yet increasingly exposed to the material and cultural temptations of the west and South Korea, even children are less convinced by their leader’s prowess.

As North Korea is now learning, there are perils in extolling the virtues of a leadership beyond the reasonable. A storm of propaganda is an effective strategy whilst it prevails, but can rapidly dissolve as circumstances change. Take Muammar Gaddafi’s cult of personality in Libya, which demanded the avowal of extraordinary claims of his revolutionary intellect and virtue. Such was the climate of fear his family engineered that it was difficult to find residents of Tripoli in the months before his demise willing to speak against the dominant state narratives. Yet following Gaddafi’s death, the signs and symbols of the old regime hastily crumbled, the Libyan population free to reject claims they had been compelled to accept. It is easier, perhaps, to forgive a mortal politician who has failed his people, than to keep the faith when God betrays his children.
The fact the DPRK still exists at all is, in no small part, testimony to the genius of the hagiographies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, and the men and women who wrote them. They are the foundation upon which the edifice of North Korean cultural orthodoxy has been raised. Yet the ground is shifting, even as the state seeks new ways to maintain “domain consensus”. It may be too late. If so, as it was in the beginning with Tangun and with Kim Il-sung, Korean time will begin again, with new stories waiting to be told.

A longer version of this article first appeared on Sino NK

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