

Looking for Mr. X: North Korea's Successor

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I. Introduction

Brent Choi, a North Korea Specialist at the Joongang Daily, writes "most of the reports on North Korea's successor are 99% wrong. Kim Jong-il's sons might not even make it to the list of candidates. In order to become a successor the prospective leader will have to prove oneself in enhancing both economy and ideology. The winner "Mr. X" will sooner or later emerge at the front seat of the power through generation shifts after winning the tacit approval and confirmation from political elites. That precise timing will be in accordance with the seventh Party Convention. Let's just continue to keep a close eye on the North for 2-3 years more.

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II. Report by Brent Choi

- "Looking for Mr. X: North Korea's Successor"
by Brent Choi

Introduction

The New York Times, Newsweek, Der Spiegel? they've all gotten it wrong. AP, AFP, Reuters and even the U.S. intelligence service got it wrong. Not even Korea's own local papers are free of charge when it came down to this particular issue - the issue of who will be the next to succeed Kim Jong-il's place in the future. Various newspapers and journals at both home and abroad have been carrying on with this wild guessing game for a whole decade. This article is show why numerous reports and controversy about Kim's heir are missing the point and provide analysis and future prospects in deciding the North's heir-to-the-throne.

Back in October 28, Der Spiegel, the German weekly paper reported that Kim Jong-il's second son Kim Jong-chul (24) attended the special dinner party his father hosted for the visiting Chinese Prime Minister Hu Jintao upon Hu's request in wanting to see the "next leader" of the Stalinist state. The German paper thus concluded that here's the direct evidence to who'll be in charge of the nation. The article however, didn't reveal the source of this information.

"Spiegel" means "mirror" in German yet this time the famous mirror failed to clearly reflect some of the indisputable facts and process in North Korea. The country in question is armed with the Juche (non-reliance) ideology and tons of pride. It certainly isn't the country to reveal something as sensitive as the next heir to its nation in a dinner party simply by the request of the Chinese leader. Just take a course on North Korea for one semester in college and you'll know how absurd all this sounds. Of course, in reality we are well aware that even some of the absurd facts get to spread around the globe.

It's not that much different in Japan, either. When AERA, the sister paper to Asahi Shimbun reported how Kim Jong-il chose Jong-chul to be his heir back in September 2002, the paper was basing their facts on a small pocketbook they managed to sneak out of North Korea. The pocketbook was said to belong to a personal secretary to the North's leader himself. The article, quoting the words of one high-level source in the Stalinist state, pointed out that the incumbent leader too started to take part in leading the Workers' Party around Kim Jong-chul's age when he graduated from the University 40 years ago. Kim Jong-chul has become the newest head member of the Workers' Party this April, went on the article indicating Kim Jong-il has probably made up his mind already.

The article was found out to be false after some examining of the "pocketbook." For one thing, the little book had too many grammatical errors and expressions to belong to any Korean. In fact, when I go to Yanbian or other border regions that divides North Korea from China I, too get approached by quite a number of Chinese-Koreans who are eager to sell "confidential documents" from North Korea. Most of the papers they show contain titles like "Secret Strategy for Nukes", "Hidden Nuclear Facility" or a treasure buried inside some kind of facilities. These documents are usually marked by a heavy stamp supposedly belonging to North Korea's top intelligence service. But once you look in further it won't be that hard to identify numerous grammatical mistakes followed by wrong titles given to major North Korea officials. However that's the tricky part for foreign reporters who don't read Hangeul or Korean characters. It's likely that AERA paid couple hundreds or thousand dollars for the pocketbook by a simple reassurance from the broker and the fat stamp on the front.

In August, 2002 another wired news service in Japan, quoting words from their source in Beijing reported that it seems Kim Hyun - half brother to Kim Jong-nam, the eldest son of the North's leader

- is to be the next successor. That proved to be another bogus report. One would've seen some changes within the Cabinet and general party line and none was made. Jong Ha-chul was still the head of the propaganda division. Choe Choon-hwang still remained as the first vice director within the Party. The only noticeable change came 2 years later, when Choe was replaced by Ri Jae-il in 2004. What's more the North's leader doesn't even have a son that goes with the name "Hyun" (despite claims from some defectors who claim he does). Much of Japanese media has seen failure in confirming some of these basic facts.

Situation in South Korea is no better as the rightist media represented by papers like Chosun Ilbo or Dong-ah Ilbo take full advantage of foreign press. These papers, by highlighting the successor to the so-called 'throne' giving impression to the public that North Korea is indeed a backward country that operates under feudal system and not a socialist nation as it claims to be.

Some scholars in Seoul too, argue that it's true Kim Jong-il decided on his heir. Jung Seong-jang, a member to national policy think tank Sejong Institute has argued that Kim Jong-chul is the one since 2002. To back up his claim Jung pointed out that 1) North Korea has started deifying Kim Jong-chul's mother, Goh Young-hee 2) Jang Sung-thaek, brother-in-law to the North's leader and the next-in-line to succeed him got relegated 3) the resurrection of "Three Revolution Team" whose activity remained slack during the mid-90s. The Team was established around the time Kim Jong-il was first declared to inherit his late-father's position 4) The sudden emergence of the term "Center of Revolution" is the North's propaganda. Jung insisted that these changes are very similar to back in 1974 when the former leader of North Korea appointed the current leader to succeed his place.

Let's start from the fourth argument. The term "Center of Revolution" is nothing new as it has been used since late 90s. This vocabulary is meant to stress the unity within the North Korean Society and has nothing to do with successor issue. Also, linking the establishment of "Three Revolution Team" hardly has anything to do with Kim Jong-il's designation as the next leader. The "Team" set up in the mid-70s was a political and social campaign held in nationwide scale. The one established in 2002 under the same title aims to reinvigorate the economy through dispatching scientists and technicians to local factories. Jang seemed to have mixed up few facts. Also the relegation of Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law was due to an unexpected incident and should not be confused with deliberate preparations for the emergence of even more powerful figure. The second argument of deifying Goh Young-hee, Kim's second wife is based on one of the references published by Chosun (Korea) People's Army Publishing Company in August, 2002. Inside the report is a phrase that encourages people to assist the dear leader and show utmost respect to honorable mother. This would've become a cold, hard proof if the paragraph did mention the name "Goh Young-hee" except that it hasn't! The phrase didn't specify who this "mother" is. Moreover 99% of commoners in the North have no idea that their leader had a wife who grew up in Japan- that would be the sign of lowly status in the society - much less her name. To imagine a massive worship going on from a single, vague line is going a bit too far.

These common mistakes usually stem from either oversimplifying or looking down on situation in North Korea. Most analysts and media at both home and abroad begin their presumption under the 3 premises. 1) North Korea is country of one-man dictatorship. 2) The current leader of North Korea inherited his position from his late-father. 3) Therefore the incumbent leader will choose his son to be the next successor just like his father. Thus began the wild search for Kim Jong-il's favorite son. According to this logic, Kim's eldest son Kim Jong-nam is out of question. This son brought on his father's wrath after getting arrested at Japan's Narita Airport for using fake passport in an attempt to visit Tokyo Disneyland with his son in May, 2001. He's still unable to return to Pyongyang after the incident. Perhaps Kim's third son, Kim Jong-woon (23) may stand a chance as revealed in a book written by Japanese chef Fujimoto Genji. Genji who served as a personal chef to the Kim Jong-il for

13 years up till 2001 said that the leader Kim greatly favored his third son who happens to look a lot like himself. Genji added that Kim once referred to his second son Jong-chul as being too "unmanly."

As a journalist who's been observing North Korea for some time, I too agreed that it's high time Kim start thinking about his heir. But reports and debates that surround us today have generally missed the point. Not a thought is given to the actual mechanism of Workers' Party or military leadership, how the likely changes in personnel could affect the political landscape there and on the nation's pending issues like saving the economy. Most discussions are limited to scratching the surface based on simple premises and rushed conclusions. However if Kim Jong-il is truly allowed to wield power over the regime what has been stopping him from declaring his crown prince years ago?

To me it makes more sense tracing back to the times when Kim Jong-il was first chosen as a successor and figure out what it takes to become an actual heir accepted not only by his father but also by the North Korean leadership. Below are few conditions to become the next-in-line.

In North Korea it takes more than having your father as incumbent leader to become the next dear leader. As harsh as North Korea is in practicing its dictatorship, you still need to prove yourself as a capable leader and earn tacit approval from elite politicians and army leaders. You need to pass certain confirmation process.

Just go through the history of North Korea's politics and one will realize that it wasn't pure luck that helped Kim Jong-il to gain his current post. In 1967 during the process of reshuffling the party, a power struggle known as "Park Geum-chul- Ri Hyo-soon Incident" took place. Kim Jong-il made his political debut by jumping right into the middle of the political brawl. In 1969 he became deputy director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department and by 1974 was designated as his father's successor. In October, 1980s Kim was elected as a Party Secretariat, cementing his position as an official ruler next to his father. At the same time Kim not only systemized the Juche Ideology but also produced dozens of movies and theories. He also made himself known in various economic activities. In other words it was the need for political successor at the time, Kim's own achievements in the relevant fields and acceptance of North Korean society that combined to embrace the advent of second leader.

In that respect, there are 2 serious flaws for any of Kim Jong-il's son to meet the same criteria. First, Kim Jong-nam and Kim Jong-chul both studied abroad in Switzerland. Their experiences in a free, democratic country make them hard to fit into a nation driven by Juche Ideology. Besides, their backgrounds have practically blocked them out from successful "cliques" among North Korea politicians. Another flaw comes from lack of recognition from their grandfather Kim Il-sung, the late-leader of North Korea. Although it's been a decades since he passed away senior Kim still stands as a main source of justification in deciding significant matters. None of his grandsons got his official blessing while he was alive. That's because both Kim Jong-chul and Kim Jong-woon's mothers -Song Hye-rim and Goh Yong-hee -were his father's "hidden lovers" which make them illegitimate grandsons. This fact alone could seriously hinder their way to succession. If Kim Jong-il goes ahead and choose one of them to be his heir before making them go through the "right" processes whoever that may be, his political life will be short-lived.

In these context chances of Kim Jong-il choosing his own blood to be his successor is relatively slim. Back in the 70s when he was appointed a heir, one of the physiological obstacles he was forced to confront was his age. The elders in the Workers' Party considered Kim in his mid-30s to be too young. Currently, Kim's eldest son is 34 while his second son is only 24. At this rate Kim's sons would be lucky just to be included among the candidates.

Economic contribution to the country will be an important yardstick to being a successor. Despite

some signs of recovery it still hasn't reached the level of actually improving people's lives. Therefore one who causes new wind of change and bring out tangible results will get an upper hand to winning the heir ship. Furthermore, only when the economy has turned for the better can leader Kim feel safe enough to officially begin discussing the issue of successor.

The country's Army-first policy is another clue to making a successor. North Korea has long tended to resolve things through ideology regardless of the nature of the issue. It is the head of the state that secures interpretation to various political ideologies such as "Juche" or Army-first policy. In this context we need to take a closer look at the changes in Army-first policy. Ever since first introducing the Army-first policy in 1995, the North's leadership worked hard to expand on the concept, to make it become the nation's guiding ideology that drives its society. Given that it was incumbent leader's systemization of Juche Ideology that partly assured his seat as the next leader, the past 2-3 years of effort to systemize the Army-first policy may be linked to establishing the next coming leader.

A shift in generations within political party counts as another variable. For the past 10 years Kim Jong-il has quietly but persistently pushed ahead with changes within the political circle. While leaving the old guards at the top post intact, he has succeeded in reshuffling the personnel at mass organization, cabinet, director-level people within the Workers' Party and the military to be replaced by younger politicians otherwise known as the revolutionary second generation. Within couple of years' time most of the older politicians would be obliged to retire to let the incumbent high-and-mid elite class to emerge as a power. The full-blown change is likely to take place during the seventh Worker's Party National Convention scheduled to take place from 2007-2008. The talks of successor will finally take off behind the curtains around that time.

To wrap things up, most of the reports on North Korea's successor are 99% wrong. Kim Jong-il's sons might not even make it to the list of candidates. In order to become a successor the prospective leader will have to prove oneself in enhancing both economy and ideology. The winner "Mr. X" will sooner or later emerge at the front seat of the power through generation shifts after winning the tacit approval and confirmation from political elites. That precise timing will be in accordance with the seventh Party Convention. Let's just continue to keep a close eye on the North for 2-3 years more.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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