

North Korea's Third Hereditary Succession: Determining Factors & Hidden Meanings

Lee Seung Yeol

ASIA PAPER
October 2011



Institute for Security &
Development Policy

North Korea's Third
Hereditary Succession:
Determining Factors and Hidden
Meanings

Lee Seung Yeol

North Korea's Third Hereditary Succession: Determining Factors and Hidden Meanings is an Asia Paper published by the Institute for Security and Development Policy. *The Asia Papers Series* is the Occasional Paper series of the Institute's Asia Program, and addresses topical and timely subjects. The Institute is based in Stockholm, Sweden, and cooperates closely with research centers worldwide. Through its Silk Road Studies Program, the Institute runs a joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. The Institute is firmly established as a leading research and policy center, serving a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders, and journalists. It is at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security, and development. Through its applied research, publications, research cooperation, public lectures, and seminars, it functions as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion.

The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.

© Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2011

ISBN: 978-91-86635-18-3

Printed in Singapore

Distributed in Europe by:

Institute for Security and Development Policy
Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden
Tel. +46-841056953; Fax. +46-86403370
Email: info@isdpeu

Distributed in North America by:

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel. +1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785
E-mail: caci2@jhuadig.admin.jhu.edu

Editor: Dr. Bert Edström

Assistant Editor: Elliot Brennan

Special thanks to Erica Ohene-Bekoe for her editorial assistance.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Bert Edström at: bedstrom@isdpeu

Contents

- Executive Summary5
- Introduction7
- Three Determining Factors of Kim Jong Un’s Succession9
 - Legitimacy9
 - Leadership12
 - People16
- Three Hidden Meanings of Kim Jong Un’s Succession20
 - 1) Essential meaning of the succession.....20
 - 2) Structural meaning of the succession.....22
 - 3) Political meaning of the succession25
- Conclusion28
- About the Author30

Executive Summary

North Korea appointed Kim Jong Un, the youngest son of Kim Jong Il, to the position of vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) at the third Party Convention on September 28, 2010. Just one day earlier, he was promoted to the rank of four-star General in the North Korean People's Army. The third generation succession is very different from his father's, Kim Jong Il. To understand the differences between Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un's succession, the determining factors affecting the establishment of the system of succession has to be identified. According to the North Korean theory of succession, there are three stages in this process: Firstly, the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un's succession is based on blood ties, whereas the legitimacy of Kim Jong Il was established by his loyalty to the great leader, Kim Il Sung. Secondly, the leadership system of Kim Jong Un is based on the "Songun (Military First policy)" whilst Kim Jong Il's leadership system was "party" based. Third, a critical factor for Kim Jong Un's succession depends on the level of opening up of its daily-market system, whereas previously the Juche idea had been used by Kim Jong Il in order to gain people's support. This difference implies that Kim Jong Un's position as successor is more vulnerable to any domestic sociopolitical resistance when compared to his father's position in the 1970s.

The main characteristic of North Korea's method of succession can be explained as, "the unitary leadership of the successor will be completed as long as the suryong is living." This is unique and differs from how other socialist countries historically have selected their new leaders. If solved quickly, the succession issue could help to stabilize the regime, but the coexistence of two leaders, both striving for absolute power and a central role in the revolution, might bring about many new problems. With reference to the above three differences, there are three hidden meanings of the succession, and potential problems which could occur: Firstly, the essential meaning of the succession depends on how long is needed to complete his unitary leadership system during the first period. In other words, it is more difficult to establish his organization system and build up support from the people than to be elected as successor. Secondly, the structural meaning of

the succession means the change of the political system, suryong system, in North Korea. In other words, the combination system that has represented the voluntary support of the people for the party and suryong has now collapsed, leaving the oppressive system as the only force keeping the supreme leader in power. Third, the political meaning of the succession is this break-even point of power between the suryong and successor. In other word, as the power of the successor increases, the power of the supreme leader, the suryong, is decreasing. The successor will be more powerful than the suryong, resulting in that "the paradox of power" cannot be avoided.

These determining factors differences and hidden meanings will play a pivotal role in the success or failure of Kim Jong Un. As a result, in the course of the power shift, the possibility of the political change in North Korea will increase more and more.

Introduction

Any research on “post-Kim Jong Il’s” North Korea is a difficult task indeed, but it is still a topic too intriguing and important that it is worth keeping an eye on. Since Kim Jong Il’s appointment as successor in 1974, it has been difficult to imagine North Korea without “the Dear Leader.” The appointment of his successor, Kim Jong Un in 2010, has further highlighted the necessity for research on a post-Kim Jong Il North Korea.

In August 2008, Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke and disappeared completely from public view. He did not even appear at the foundation of the anniversary of the regime “9.9” and the Workers’ Party anniversary, “10.10” in Pyongyang. After the stroke, his health problems therefore became a focal point of analysis when trying to predict North Korea’s future. Kim’s health problem is an important factor that accelerates the introduction of the third hereditary.

The first thing Kim did before reappearing in public after his stroke was to designate his youngest son Jong Un as his successor in early January 2009. The same year President Barack Obama was inaugurated as president of the United States. His inauguration increased hopes in North Korea for future dialogue with the United States, something that was not seen during the George W. Bush administration. North Korea also took several steps in order to improve their standing vis-à-vis the United States.

A few months later, the North launched a long-range missile and carried out a second nuclear test. How can we explain these sudden changes in behavior? Of course, it is nothing new for North Korea to engage in brinkmanship in an attempt to improve its bargaining position in regard to the United States. But the aggressiveness of these moves took many North Korean watchers by surprise. Meanwhile, a major political change might be in for North Korea as Kim Jong Il’s successor emerges for the public and the world.

The nuclear and succession issues are interlocked, but at the same time they have to be viewed separately. On one hand, North Korea’s second nuclear test served as a way of consolidating the system of succession and Kim Jong Un’s ascendancy to power. Therefore, nuclear tests, missile

launches and other military provocations served the purpose of building up the military leadership and the people's loyalty for Kim Jung Un and to preserve the present system of succession.

On the other hand, North Korea's nuclear test should be viewed separately from the succession issue. Nuclear test also served the purpose of strengthening its bargaining power vis-à-vis the United States. In the phase of negotiations, the two countries can discuss how to proceed with the ultimate disposal of nuclear materials such as the shutdown of the nuclear facilities and disarmament.

However, if negotiations were to be suspended, these provocations would be useful for North Korea to make the United States come to the negotiating table again. Therefore, North Korea has increased steadily its own nuclear capability and threat.¹ Then what is the purpose of North Korea's behavior? To answer this question, it is necessary to determine the factors that justify the third hereditary succession in North Korea and the hidden meanings that prove the questions for the succession result in North Korea from behind these factors. The purpose of this report is to clarify these arguments.

On September 28, 2010, Kim Jong Un was appointed vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), one day earlier he had been promoted to four-star General in the Korean People's Army. With the transfer of power from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jung Un, North Korea has laid out the third stage in its policy of hereditary succession. Although Kim Jong Un is both young and inexperienced, according to succession theory, he will become a key actor to explain the situation of North Korea's future due to his position and role as successor in the North's political system. This report is a study of the "post-Kim Jong Il" system, which will emerge in the course of Kim Jong Un's ascension to power. These perspectives on the determining factors and hidden meanings will be presented and can hopefully help the understanding of the future direction of succession in North Korea.

¹ Kim Geun Sik, "If the negotiation was given up, the conclusion would be inaction," *PRESSIAN*, June, 29, 2009.

Three Determining Factors of Kim Jong Un's Succession

There is a distinct difference between the environment which presented North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's ascension to power; a process which begun in the late 1970s and resulted in the succession of his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, being named his successor. The first generation of revolutionaries in North Korea assembled the formation of public opinion regarding the succession of Kim Jong Il, which introduced his nomination through an official process during the Workers' Party Convention in 1974. Then six years later, he was officially appointed to succeed his father Kim Il Sung. Thus, following the family tradition, Kim Jong Un was nominated in early 2009 at the personal initiative of his father Kim Jong Il and then 21 months later, he was officially appointed successor at the Third Workers' Party Meeting in 2010.

This difference implies that Kim Jong Un's position as successor is more vulnerable to any domestic sociopolitical resistance when compared to his father's position in the 1970s. To understand the differences between Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un's succession, the determining factors affecting the establishment of the system of succession has to be identified. According to the North Korean theory of succession, there are three stages in this process: (1) the creation of legitimacy of Kim Jong Un as a successor; (2) the cementation of his own system of leadership; and (3) the establishment of a firm base of popular support around the future supreme leader.

Legitimacy

The North Korean theory of succession stipulates: "The successor to the suryong should, above all, be the embodiment of the suryong's revolutionary ideology as a great master of ideological theories."² For this reason, Kim

² Kim Yu Min, 후계자론 [The Theory of Successor] (Seoul: Shinmunhwasa, 1984), pp. 75-76. Suryong means the supreme leader in North Korea and especially indicates president Kim Il Sung.

Jong Un must launch a campaign to propagate himself and his views as the model example of the “military-first” ideology. This is highly important within a context, because the North Korean regime has made the idea of military-first one of the central aspects of the dignity of North Korean socialism since the concept was presented in 1998.³ Kim Jong Un has to create legitimacy for his succession and create his own foundation on which to base his power. Significantly, the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un’s claim to power is based on bloodline, in sharp contrast with that of his father Kim Jong Il, whose legitimacy to power was based on his extraordinary loyalty and personality.

Under the initiative of Kim Jong Il, North Korea has taken measures in two directions in an attempt to legitimize another hereditary succession to state leadership, with respect to Kim Jong Un. Firstly, in order to stake his legitimacy as rightful heir, Kim Jong Un continues to assert the prominence of the “*Mangyongdae* bloodline [Kim Il Sung’s birth place] and the Mount Paektu bloodline [Kim Jong Il’s birth place].” A photo of a poster taken by a Taiwanese photographer, Hanming Huang, in Wonsan of Kangwon Province in September 2009, revealed the North’s strenuous effort to propagate to North Korean citizens the status of Kim Jong Un as the sole successor to the *suryong*. The *Wall* newspaper, under the headline “The Glory of Our Korean People Enjoying the Blessings Originating in a General (referring to Kim Jong Il) and a Four-star General (referring to Kim Jong Un),” read: “Young General, Comrade Kim Jong Un, who has preserved the bloodline of *Mangyongdae* and the bloodline of Mount Paektu ... Shining bright eternally is the way laid before Kim Il Sung’s People...”⁴

The North Korean media has published several stories emphasizing the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un’s blood-oriented succession to power in the socialist country. On October 9, 2009, North Korean Central TV aired a performance with a chorus singing a song titled “His Steps.” The sole purpose of the song was to praise Kim Jong Un’s leadership. It was performed in

³ Cheong Seong Chang, “A Change of the North Korean Regime, a Change in Its System, and Conditions and Prospects for the Korean Unification,” in *The Process of and Ideas for the Korean Unification* (Seoul: Ewha Institute Unification Studies, 2009), pp. 11–12. This is a collection of papers presented in an academic forum held in Seoul under the joint sponsorship of the Korea Council of Unification-related Institutes in Unification in Ewha Womans University.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

North Hwanghae Province during the opening of a new theater and was attended by Kim Jong Il.⁵ In January 8, 2010, Kim Jong Un's 28th birthday was marked when the (North) Korean Central Broadcasting Station aired a special report by "The Youth Vanguard," an organ of the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League, under the headline "The Future of Juche Chosun, Which Firmly Preserves the Bloodline of *Mangyongdae* and the Bloodline of Mount *Paektu*, Is Immensely Bright and Promising."⁶ The bloodline of *Mangyongdae* and Mount *Paektu* is a code phrase referring to Kim Jong Un.

North Korea has declared that Kim Jong Un was born on January 8, 1983, but the North has pushed back his birth date by one year to 1982 since it publicized the move to make him successor in June 2009, in an apparent effort to promote his claim to legitimacy. With that change, the young Kim will turn 30th birthday in 2012, the year marking the 100th birthday of his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, and the 70th birthday of his father. North Koreans regard the 10 unit numbers, such as 30th, 70th, and 100th, as holy signs. Under a similar context, North Korea has said Kim Jong Il was born in a secret camp on Mount Paektu on February 16, 1942. North Korea regarded Mount Paektu as the holy place. This claim was first presented to the public in the early 1980s when he publically was announced as the successor to be.

Secondly, the North Korean government has also argued that Kim Jong Un's idolization is proper in regard to his status as successor. The North Korean media also hails other "outstanding" abilities of the young Kim as the man who will lead the military-first politics of the North in the future. Perceived to be "proficient in artillery," he is said to be responsible for the North Korean army's use of maps based on GPS data. The North asserts that the artillery drill conducted early in 2010 near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) was under the command of Kim Jong Un. It also states that the artillery drill, broadcasted by North Korean Central TV, was observed by North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. The young Kim is also said to have commanded the drill on a basis of his graduation thesis written in his last days at Kim Il Sung Military University. Moreover, the North maintains that Kim Jong Un also has profound knowledge of advanced technologies such as controlling the compute-

⁵ The (North) Korean Central Broadcasting, Oct. 9, 2009.

⁶ The (North) Korean Central Broadcasting, Jan. 8, 2010.

controlled firework display held during the recently held mass games in Pyongyang in April and May in 2010.⁷

The North has recently published propaganda posters in Pyongyang bragging about achievements allegedly made by Kim Jong Un. One poster is about computer numerical control (CNC) and was found in front of the Pyongyang First Department Store: "Toward CNC and the world." Official media recently claimed that the people could expect a "bright future" due to an "extraordinary event" constituting the nomination of Kim Jong Un as the successor of his father. Furthermore, the North has propagated that the launch of the Kwangmyongsong No. 2 rocket in April 2009 was made possible due to Kim Jong Un's achievements. The North has given credit to the introduction of CNC into all of its industries to Kim Jong Un and his great knowledge in the fields of scientific technology.

As mentioned above, the processes which brought Kim Jong Il to power greatly differs from that of Kim Jong Un. While creating legitimacy for Kim Jong Il back in the 1970s and 1980s, the North focused on his loyalty to the suryong's revolutionary cause. Great steps were also taken to promote the personality of Kim Il Sung. On the contrary, the North is emphasizing the bloodline-oriented legitimacy of Kim Jong Un's succession, and propagating the blood-based idolization. This difference implies that the base for the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un's succession is weaker than that of Kim Jong Il.

Leadership

The core element of North Korea's political system is the party, because the leadership of succession is made under the principle: "The successor is the party's leader." The party has served as a channel for realizing the suryong's command and played a pivotal role for bridging the suryong and the people together into a single living body. North Korea's official slogan "One for all, all for one," is but one example of the regime's collectivist socialist system. Party bureaucrats are playing a pivotal role in this collective system. Particularly, the Organization and Guidance Department, and the Propaganda and Agitation Department serve as the core of Kim Jong Il's leadership system. Relying on these two departments, the North Korean leader has exercised his

⁷ Joo Sung Wha, "Kim Jong Un commanded the shelling in the West Sea," *The Dong-A Ilbo*, March 2, 2010.

absolute power and has been able to establish his leadership. He has also used the rationing system to control the party and state offices, such as the 10-point principle for the unique ideology, the party-oriented life of party members and the *juche* idea.⁸

Under a constitutional revision in 2009, a remarkable change was seen in the status and role of the military, when the North made “the National Defense Commission (NDC) chairman as the supreme state leader” (Article 100). At the same time, the military-first principle was elevated to the same level as the *juche* idea in regards to ideological importance for the governance of the state (Article 3). The status of soldiers was also elevated above workers, peasants, working intellectuals, and all other professionals (Article 4); a move aimed at boosting the military’s role in the North and defining the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a military-first country, rather than a socialist state. North Korea has also reinforced Kim Jong Un’s military leadership through the formal appointment of his position as successor. On September 28, 2010, he was appointed vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, just one day prior to his promotion as a four-star general in the Korean People’s Army.

In addition to building the base for his leadership, the constitutional amendment’s support of the military-first idea and other measures taken to appoint Kim Jong Un to the position of vice-chairman may herald a remarkable change in the North Korean political sector. Previously, the *juche* idea and the Organization and Guidance Department had played a pivotal role to establish Kim Jong Il’s leadership. Contrary to this, the military-first idea of the Central Military Commission and other security-related offices will most likely play the leading role regarding Kim Jong Un’s ascension to power. We can therefore expect Kim Jong Un’s system of leadership to differ from that of his father in two ways.

First, it is likely that Kim Jong Un will concentrate on strengthening his leadership within the military, because he was appointed vice-chairman of Central Military Commission; he will also extend his control over every military institution such as the National Defense Commission, the General Political Bureau of the KPA (Korean People’s Army), and other security-related offices. Presently, Kim Jong Un is reportedly the head of the State

⁸ *Juche* is North Korea’s dominant idea for the revolution and the construction of the country.

Security and Safeguard Department. He is likely to use the army to establish his leadership, though his father began his activities in the party apparatus.

It is important, even essential, for Kim Jong Un to be able to present his own concrete military-related achievements in order to prove his abilities with respect to the military-first policy. North Korea's Department of Propaganda has already claimed that Kim Jong Un is qualified for that job. The North began to build Kim Jong Un's image as successor to Kim Jong Il by asserting that he has learned military affairs, including the *juche*-oriented techniques of commanding the army, while attending Kim Il Sung Military University from 2002 to 2006. Propaganda boasting the "greatness of the respected General, Comrade Kim Jong Un" is believed to have been distributed in the North Korean army in May or June 2009. During the presentation of his graduation certificate and emblem of the military academy on December 24, 2006, Kim Jong Un expressed "his wishes to succeed in the great cause of a *juche*-oriented military-first revolution brilliantly."⁹

Secondly, elite groups in the military and the regime security apparatus will be the power base on which his succession will depend. Two individuals who are getting the attention of North Korean watchers in relation to the establishment of Kim Jong Un's leadership are Jang Song Thaek, the leader of the Regime Security Elites, and Ri Yong Ho, the leader of the new military elites. Jang Song Thaek was entrusted with the job to play a leading role in the establishment of Kim Jong Un's leadership and has the broadest power base of the two. He was appointed vice-chairman of the National Defence Commission, alternate members of Political Bureau, member of Central Military Commission, and Administration Department director of WPK. He is the brother-in-law of Kim Jong Il and has reportedly been an interim for him for some time, especially since Kim suffered a stroke in August 2008. Ri Yong Ho is in control of the strongest power base, and was appointed vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission together with Kim Jong Un. He is the chief of the General Staff and at 68, is relatively younger than the leading cadres – especially, O Kuck Ryol (80), Kim Yong Chun (75) – of the military and represents the generation shift in North Korea's military leadership.

⁹ Cheong Seong Chang, "The shelling is the work of Kim Jong-un who begins to dominate the military," *Sisa Journal*, February 24, 2010.

The promotion of U Dong Chuk to the first-deputy head of the National Security and Safeguard Department is most likely positioned for backing up the hereditary succession, because the main job of the secret police is to root out anti-party and anti-regime elements along with ideological deviants. Kim Jong Gak, the first-deputy head of the General Army Political Bureau, has played a pivotal role of establishing Kim Jong Un's succession within the military. The role of institutions, military and security, whose job is to safeguard the North Korean system has grown in recent years; indubitably to prevent the low- and middle-class elite from deviating, and ease social unrest at the time after the succession in September 2010.

During the establishment of Kim Jong Un's leadership succession, the North Korean leadership can no longer be aided by the principle of "the process succession should be under the auspices and initiative of the party." It is necessary for Kim Jong Un to demonstrate his ability to exert his own military-first leadership at a time when the core of power has moved from the party to the army; since the legitimacy of his leadership will be completed through the monopoly of the interpretation of his military-first ideology. Therefore, Kim Jong Un's succession can expose its specific nature in two aspects in the course of establishing his succession.

First, it is likely that a highly suppressive social atmosphere will characterize the period of the regime change, because Kim Jong Il's leadership is supported by a party-based ruling structure based on both intense repression and a high level of voluntary loyalty from the people.¹⁰ However, Kim Jong Un's military-first leadership style will most likely be highly influenced to a considerable degree by the Army Security Service and the Ministry of Public Security. This will turn the North even more into a state based on tyranny and violence.¹¹

Secondly, Kim Jong Un's increased power over the army will negatively affect Kim Jong Il's authority in the same area. In the military-first leadership environment where the North has to create space for the successor, while the supreme leader, the suryong, is still alive, there is a great risk that disputes between the suryong and the successor, and the people behind them both might erupt.¹²

¹⁰ Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 58–67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–83.

¹² Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies," *World Politics*,

People

The North Korean government is convinced that the support of the people is vital for the successful succession to power of any new leader. Kim Jong Il has also stressed the role of the party in bringing the suryong and the people together into a single body with a common sense of destiny. For this purpose, he has presented the “principle of the union of the leader and the people” and based his leadership and his ascent to power on the support of the people.

Kim Jong Un will find a bumpy road ahead of him. The radical economic measures of July 1, 2002 taken in the aftermath of the famine in the mid-1990s have profoundly changed views and attitudes among the people. These economic reforms aimed at introducing the capital value; for instance salaries, prices, commodities, labor which undermined the ideological base in the society, and drawing the popular support on which the regime used in its claim to power. Despite unfavorable circumstances, Kim Jong Un still needs the people’s support to successfully cement his succession to power. How can he secure the people’s support at a time when the rationing system has collapsed and the party’s organizational capacity is significantly weakened?

While the economic difficulties after the mid-1990s undermined the collectivism among the North Korean people, the economic reforms of July 1, 2002 was the final stab-in-the-back of the support of socialist values by ordinary people. These reforms introduced some market functions and normalized money functions, which were determined by the principal of supply and demand; and resulted in a remarkable change of the daily life of ordinary people in the north, in regard to the access to for instance, food and clothing.¹³ The impact of the introduction of markets was significant; since the measures taken by market functions have spread throughout the north, and increased the number of wholesale markets to eight and that of retail markets to more than 300.¹⁴ This rapid development of markets

Vol. 59, No. 4 (July 2007), pp. 595–628.

¹³ Choi Soo Young, *Prospects for a Change in the North Korean Economy after the July 1, 2002 Measures* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2004), pp. 55–56.

¹⁴ “The Wealthy North Koreans,” *The Joong-Ang Sunday*, August 2, 2009. This is based on a survey conducted by the Center of Research for the North Korean Daily Living in Dongguk University.

has adversely affected the sense of collectivism around the suryong and the party. Moreover, a new wealthy class has emerged, and many North Koreans have begun to accept a growing gap between the rich and poor as an integral part of development.¹⁵ At the same time, the increasing gap and the creation of greater class difference have triggered social unrest in the country; which reflects that the value of economy has become an important driving factor in establishing a new society in North Korea.

The North Korean authorities are concerned that the developments of markets might undermine the foundation of collectivism. At the same time, they have no options but to allow them in a situation where the rationing system has ceased to function. Several measures have been taken, aiming at regulating the markets, but all have failed because of the resistance of ordinary citizens. The sense of crisis, touched off by the continued spread of markets and the emergence of a capitalist class, triggered the government's currency reform on November 30, 2009. The main reason behind the redenomination of North Korean bank notes was not only slow skyrocketing inflation but also roll-back market reforms, which was seen as an obstacle to Kim Jong Un's succession to power. However, as early as in September of 2009, Kim Jong Il is reported to have notified senior officials in economy-related offices, including the Ministry of Foreign Trade, that the planned economy is incompatible with the market economy.¹⁶ His statement is based on his view that the market is an essential factor to trigger the crisis facing the socialist regime. Reportedly, he began to worry about the proliferation of markets when an incident of so-call "slogan trees" took place in Yonsan Country of North Hamgyong Province in July 2007.¹⁷ In June 2008, Kim criticized the market, saying, "the market is a stronghold for non-socialist phenomena."

In the short-term, the currency reform was effective in weakening market forces threatening the regime. However, in the long run, the currency reform resulted in further worsening the living conditions of ordinary citizens as it

¹⁵ Kim Bo Geun, "The North Korean Merchant Class and Their Capital Formation," *Korean Peninsula, the Timing of Transformation*, pp. 40–43. This is a collection of papers presented in an academic forum held a Seoul under the joint sponsorship, North Korean Studies, Institute for Unification, Korea University, held in Seoul on December 4, 2008.

¹⁶ *The Joong-Ang Ilbo*, Dec. 17, 2009.

¹⁷ The idolization which carved in wood as a sign by his aids' loyalty to praise for Kim Il Sung.

was not accompanied by proper supply of commodities; particularly, the daily necessities. The insufficient supply of daily wares is reported to have touched off a rapid increase in commodity prices. Starvation has been reported in the border areas such as in Hamgyong provinces, for instance. This forced the leadership to take measures aimed at appeasing citizens. Park Nam Gi, who was in charge of the currency reform and who had long served as head of the Finance Department in the Korean Worker's Party's central committee, was publicly executed. Former Premier Kim Yong Il allegedly had to apologize for the problems caused by the currency reform to the leaders of residential areas gathering in the People's Cultural Palace in downtown Pyongyang. Even Kim Jong Il himself has publicly expressed concerns about the situation. In an article in the *Rodong Sinmun* on February 1, 2010, he is quoted saying: "I am deeply heart-stricken by the fact that our people are still eating corn as a main dish. My job today is to supply them with a white rice meal and make them enjoy as much bread and noodles made of flour as they like."¹⁸

The chaotic economic situation facing North Korean citizens after the currency reform will likely spur the collapse of the socialist value still subconsciously remaining in the minds of ordinary people in the North. The accumulation of private property following the spread of markets has made individualism a universal value in the North. The social unrest caused by the currency reform could lead to increased resistance against the present system. Undoubtedly, further resistance against the regime will negatively affect all of the government's undertakings. For these reasons, Kim Jong Un took a number of steps in order to secure people's support for his succession.

First, Kim Jong Un pushed ahead with some populist policies. As his father has succeeded in forming his public-oriented image through the unity and guidance of the public, so there has grown a need for Kim Jong Un to provide a new revolutionary line toward the people. North Korean authorities have already launched a 150-day and a 100-day battle in an effort to establish Kim Jong Un's policy toward the public mass, but these efforts have so far failed to pay off. The government had also hoped to make the currency reform an achievement they could credit him with. It turned out to be impossible. The Japanese Jiji News Agency reported on February 21, 2010, that North Korea was providing each citizen with 500 North Korean

¹⁸ *The Rodong Sinmun*, Feb. 1, 2010.

won – equivalent to about US\$30 “under the consideration of Kim Jong Un.” This step seemed to be aimed at soothing complaints and resistance triggered by the unsuccessful currency reform and heightening expectations toward the successor.

Secondly, Kim Jong Un's presentation of a new vision of the North as a *kangsongtaeguk* (great, prosperous, and powerful country) in 2012 will, if anything, serve as a significant base of his succession. Kim Jong Il has strived to create a unified body of the *suryong*, the party and the people in a move to gain the people's support. But the sense of collectivism among the North Koreans, emphasizing the *suryong* and the party, has weakened considerably as people have had to solve questions of food, clothing and housing on the market for themselves, outside the collapsed rationing system. It will not be easy for the regime in the North to revive the sense of collectivism at a time when its citizens' reactions against their socialist system have grown ever more negative.

Kim Jong Un can no longer delay the presentation of his vision for his country as a *kangsongtaeguk*, if he wants to gain popular support. To attain that goal, he has no option but to meet the people's demands which was exposed during the course of the currency reform. As shown in the process of the failed currency reform, the proliferation of markets in the North is an irrevocable development. Without the market, the ordinary citizens cannot cope with daily life, and senior officials of the party, the government and the army can hardly sustain their livelihood without bribes originating in the marketplace. For this reason, Kim Jong Un has to allow the markets in order to gain the people's voluntary support. Since the former Prime Minister Park Pong Ju, who played a leading role in economic reforms and the “July 1 measures,” which allowed the open air markets, have been purged, Kim Jong Un is the only one who could take measures to once again initiate market reforms in North Korea.

Three Hidden Meanings of Kim Jong Un's Succession¹⁹

The main characteristic of North Korea's method of succession can be explained as, "the unitary leadership of the successor will be completed as long as the suryong is living." This is unique and differs from how other socialist countries historically have selected their new leaders. If solved quickly, the succession issue could help to stabilize the regime, but the coexistence of two leaders, both striving for absolute power and a central role in the revolution, might bring about many new problems.

1) Essential meaning of the succession

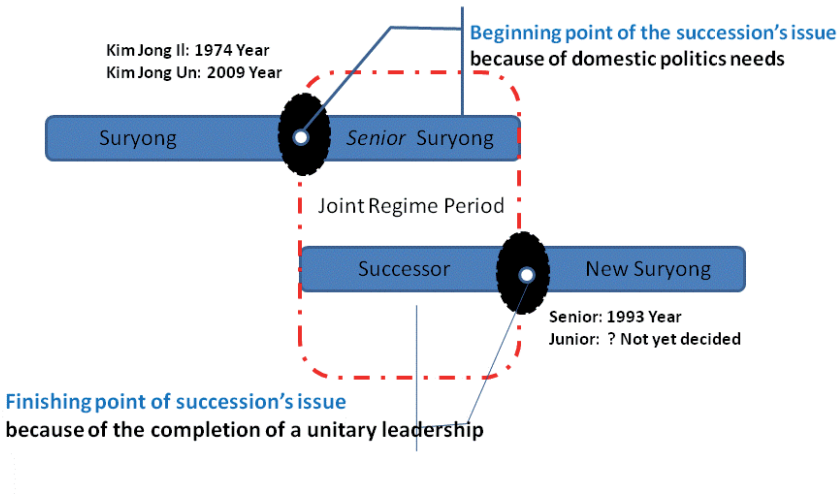
In the case of North Korea, it is important to understand that succession is about more than just the appointment of a successor. Most importantly, the process must enable the successor to establish his leadership system. In other words, to appoint a successor is just the first phase of the process, and more important is the process itself, that is, a process by which the successor can create his own structure of command and control in order to secure his place as the future leader of North Korea.

The leadership system of the successor can be explained by looking at it from two levels. First, the leader needs to create his own organizational system that can recognize his leadership thoroughly. To succeed, three requirements must be fulfilled: (1) the leader must create his own space (position) within the governing system which can achieve his unitary leadership in the party; (2) to fill this space with representatives of the elite who are loyal to him alone; (3) to create new laws and regulations that further strengthen his formal power over the party.²⁰

¹⁹ This section is a revised version of my previous paper, "The Analysis on Three Kinds of Determinants of the Succession System in North Korea." *North Korean Studies Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2010), pp. 169–80.

²⁰ Lee Seung Yeol, 김정일의 선택 [The selection of Kim Jong Il] (Seoul: Sitaechongsin,

Figure 1. The Essential Meaning of the Successor Issue



Source: Based on Lee Seung Yeol, 김정일의 선택 [The selection of Kim Jong II] (Seoul: Sitaechongsin, 2009), p. 225.

Secondly, the supreme leader, and his chosen successor, must be true leaders of the people.²¹ The successor will be crowned based on the support and trust of the people. This is established in the relationship guidance and the public in the course of the revolution and construction. According to the *juche* ideology, the people are the true holders of power and are the most important actors of historical developments. However, without the correct guidance of the *suryong* and the party (successor), they cannot fulfill their role properly as masters of history.

The successor's steps to power can be divided into two phases. First, under supervision of the incumbent *suryong*, he must create his unitary leadership (to gain control over the party, the state and to gain support from

2009), p. 224.

²¹ Kim Jae Cheon, 후계자 문제의 이론과 실천 [The theory and practice of succession] (Seoul: 1989), p. 35.

the people). Secondly, after the death of the senior suryong, he will officially take over as the new supreme leader (see Figure 1). When is the successor expected to emerge? It depends on various domestic political factors. For instance, in the case of Kim Jong Il, he emerged as a successor at a time when North Korea was concerned about the Soviet Union and China's lessons (Stalin and Mao's successors) which were similar to his succession problem; as opposed to Kim Jong Un, who emerged to the people when Kim Jong Il's health was deteriorating after his stroke in 2008.

When should the succession be regarded as completed? It is dependent upon the control of the military which is transferred from the old to the new supreme leader. In the case of Kim Jong Il who took over the military command from his father in 1993, one year before his father's death, when he inherited the post of chairman of the National Defense Commission. Kim Jong Un on the other hand, was appointed vice chairman of the Central Military Commission in 2010; therefore, it is likely that the ultimate transfer of power will go much faster than when Kim Jong Il took over from his father Kim Il Sung because Kim Jong Un has already taken the military power from the beginning of his own successorship.

The essential meaning of the issue of the succession depends on how long it will take to complete his unitary leadership system during the joint regime period (Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un). First of all, to establish his own organizational system and to gain popular support will be a much more difficult challenge for Kim Jong Un than his appointment as the future leader. Therefore, the longer this system of joint leadership between father and son lasts, the more stable the transfer of power will be. However, if Kim Jong Il's health was to deteriorate, this could cause instability, because there is not enough time to take power; especially during the period of transfer of power. When seen in terms of the essential meaning of the succession, we are able to see why Kim Jong Un's succession is bound to be vulnerable.

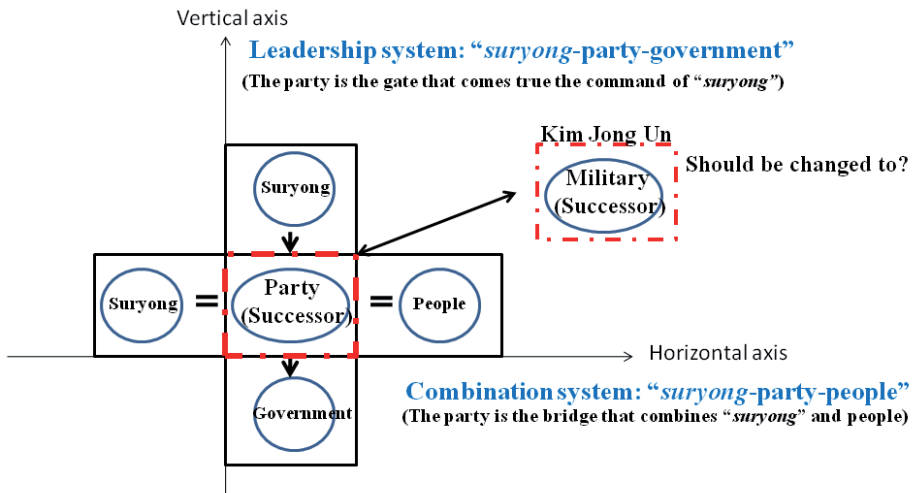
2) Structural meaning of the succession

After the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, most experts in South Korea and the United States predicted that North Korea would collapse within five years; in addition, they also insisted on the necessity of "soft landing" of North

Korea. However, North Korea did not collapse, despite the deadly famine in the mid-1990s that killed more than one million. So how did Kim Jong Il stay in power? We can find the answers in the North's political system. From 1967 onwards, North Korea's political system has been described as "the suryong system," that had the characteristics of a totalitarian system and was consolidated during Kim Jong Il's succession period. How does the suryong system work? Suzuki Masayuki has defined the main purpose of this suryong system as a guarantee that the role of the suryong can be transferred to the next generation.²² Therefore, this suryong system already includes the succession.

The suryong system can be described along two axes that can be seen in Figure 2. On the vertical axis, we have the leadership system of suryong – party – government (including the military). This is an oppressive system meant for controlling the people. On the horizontal axis we have the combined system of suryong – party – people. This is a system based on the voluntary support from the people.

Figure 2 . The Structural Meaning of the Successor Issue



Source: Based on Lee, 김정일의 선택 [The selection of Kim Jong Il], p. 227.

²² 鈴木昌之, 北朝鮮: 社主義と傳統の共鳴 [North Korea: Socialism and the resonance of traditions], transl. into Korean by Yu Young-gu as 김정일과 수령제사회주의 [Kim Jong Il and suryong socialism] (Seoul: Joong-Ang Ilbo, 1994), p. 20.

North Korea's stable political system was completed with the combination of two axes; however, what is more important is to keep the regime, especially during a time of crises. Voluntary support system is of greater importance than the oppressive one. This combination system was still in function, which is the reason why North Korea did not collapse in the 1990s. So what is this combined system composed of? The North Koreans are told to believe that they have two lives. One is their natural life; the other is a sociopolitical one. While their natural life stems from their parents, their sociopolitical life is given to them by the suryong. The natural life is finite, but the political life is eternal. This makes the sociopolitical life most important.

The individual can only gain political life through unity with the suryong. So how can the individual North Korean achieve this unity with the supreme leader? By eagerly participating in activities of Worker's Party that combines the people and the suryong; the individual comes closer to the supreme leader.

The main force in the preservation of the "suryong system" is the party (see Figure 2). This stems from the party's role in the revolution and the national construction. In the leadership system, "the party's role is the gate to realize the commands of the suryong." In the combination system, "the party is the bridge that combines the suryong and the people."²³ Therefore, the most important thing to keep in North Korea is the party. The successor is in charge of this party. This is North Korea's political system. For this reason, the successor is elected as the leader of the party.

North Korea is now trying to replace the party in its role as the bridge between the suryong and the people, and the gate between the suryong and the government; with the military for the benefit of Kim Jong Un's succession. So would such a fundamental change be possible? According to the structured meaning of the succession, if this replacement is recognized, it would be the change of the political system. In other words, the combination system that has represented the voluntary support of the people for the party and suryong has now collapsed, leaving the oppressive system as the only force keeping the supreme leader in power. As a result, if a crisis like the one in the mid-1990s would repeat itself today or in the near

²³ Kim, 후계자 문제의 이론과 실천 [The theory and practice of succession], p. 50.

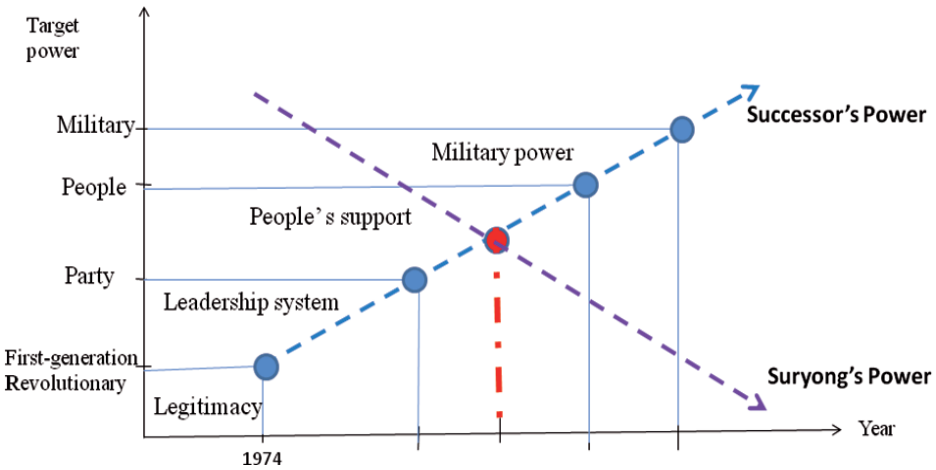
future, the regime would find itself in a much more difficult situation with the oppressive system.

3) Political meaning of the succession

In 1997 Hwang Jang Yop became the highest ranking politician to have defected from North Korea. Later, he said that the balance of power between Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il shifted in 1985. Hwang has described the period before 1985 as the "Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il joint regime"; and the period after 1985 as the "Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung joint regime." So how can we witness this paradoxical management of power? The reason is that North Korea has selected and announced a successor before the death of the senior suryong. Since the lessons learnt from the Soviet Union (Khrushchev's movement) and China (Lin Piao's attempted coup) were related to the selection of the successor, it gave them that prior knowledge on how to solve of the successor issue in North Korea. However, the inherent problem of this system is that the more political power of the successor is increasing, the less power is bestowed for the suryong. As seen in Figure 3, Kim Jong Il gradually increased his influence among first generation revolutionaries, the party, the people and the military. Even if the leadership of the successor is completed under the suryong's protection, the above "paradox of power" cannot be avoided.

The political meaning of the succession resides in this break-even point of power between the suryong and the successor. As the power of the successor increases, the power of the supreme leader, the suryong, decreasing. In other words, at some point the successor will be more powerful than the suryong, resulting in that "the paradox of power" cannot be avoided. When Kim Jong Il succeeded his father Kim Il Sung, this point was reached in 1985, so when will Kim Jong Un become more powerful than his father? It is unclear. What is known is that this point in time is inevitable. This is the nature of power.

Figure 3. The Political Meaning of the Successor Issue



Source: Based on Lee, 김정일의 선택 [The selection of Kim Jong Il], p. 226.

The person who knows better than anyone else about the politics of succession, the paradox of power, in North Korea is Kim Jong Il himself. His health problem is an important factor that triggered the issue of succession. In other words, if it was not for the problems of his health, the question of succession might not have surfaced until much later. After suffering a stroke in August 2008, Kim Jong Il stayed in the shadows until January 2009. The first thing he did after returning to work was to nominate his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, as his successor.

Why did Kim Jong Il choose his youngest son as successor? The candidate's personal abilities and characteristics are of the greatest concern in the selection of a successor. To say that Kim Jong Il actually came to power on his own merits is not an overstatement. In 1967 he led the purge of the Gabsan faction,²⁴ so during the process of succession he also managed to gain support from the powerful "first generation revolutionaries."

Given the relatively young age of Kim Jong Un, why was he chosen as a successor despite his young age? Kim knows better than anyone else about the political meanings of his country's system of succession, which

²⁴ The highest ranking elite group which brakes the party's unitary ideological scheme.

caused the power leakage of the suryong; therefore, he is sure to do his best to slow down his own loss of power during the succession process. He wants to be able to control both the speed and the direction of succession. In light of this, Kim Jong Nam, and Kim Jong Chul, his first and second sons who both already hold some power within the state elite, do not fit as candidates. However, Kim Jong Un is bound to build his system of succession under the authority of his father's influence, because he does not have the power elite base of support in the state. He can build up his succession of leadership within the range that his father designed. Therefore, Kim Jong Un is the most suitable candidate for his father among his three sons.

Conclusion

Kim Jong Un's path to power will undoubtedly differ from that of his father. First, Kim Jong Un has to claim the stairway to power within a much more complex context. Kim Jong Il was the dominant actor when it came to determining how the "post-Kim Il Sung era" would look. Kim Jong Un, on the other hand, is just one of many actors trying to influence the future structure of North Korea's governing body. Due to Kim Jong Il's health problems, Kim Jong Un does not have the same amount of time as his father did during his rise to power. As a result, it will be difficult for Kim Jong Un to establish a firm grip on power prior to his father's death. Kim Jong Il's health problems are not only the cause for Kim Jong Un's ascendancy to power; it is also the main cause of instability in his succession.

There are two further factors that risk the stability of the succession process. First, the unitary elite structure is no longer effective in North Korea, as a result, this instability is also shown in the division of elite groups. After the Third Party Convention (September 2010), pluralism among the elite has become even more apparent. Until now, the unitary structure of the elite has been the basic foundation in preserving the absolute power of the suryong. After this Convention, the elite leadership was divided into three groups – the revolutionary group, the regime security group, and the new military group. As a result, power competition within the elite is likely to become even more apparent and complicate the situation further.

Secondly, appealing to the people's sense of collectivism is no longer enough to gain its support. In the past, the succession based on the combination of the suryong, and the people has been promoting unity by means of stimulating the voluntary support of the citizens. However, the difficulties in the economic area from mid-1990s made the people overlook the collectivism between the suryong and people. Kim Jong Un has no option but to depend on the army and security apparatus if he is to rise to power. For this reason, it is quite possible that the North Korean leadership will be more repressive under Kim Jong Un's succession to power than it was in the 1970s, when Kim Jong Il was appointed as the future supreme leader.

Therefore, the collapse of collectivist value and division of the unitary elite structure might be motivated by the “unexpected results,” which could lead to a political change in the North’s system in the process of the third generation succession. Under the collapse of collectivist values, if a crisis, like in the mid-1990s is repeated, it would be difficult to maintain the regime with only the oppressive system. The division of the elite structure will result in some serious struggle for power over who is to emerge as the main power group for supporting Kim Jong Un’s third generation succession, and result in the “post-Kim Jong Il era.”

About the Author

Lee Seung Yeol is a Senior Research Fellow at Ewha Womans University Institute for Unification, Seoul, South Korea, and Guest Researcher at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden in 2011. He earned a doctoral degree of North Korean studies in 2009, and is specialized in study of the succession in North Korean politics. His book, *The Selection of Kim Jong-il*, was published in 2009. His academic articles are "Study on the Change of Suryoung System and the Structural Limitations of the third Succession" (*North Korean Studies Review*, 2009) and "Analysis on the Three Determinants of the Succession System in North Korea: focused on the Path-Dependency" (*North Korean Studies Review*, 2010) and "Analysis on the 'Sanction' and 'Negotiation' for Solving North Korea's Nuclear Problem" (*Peace Studies Review*, 2010).

