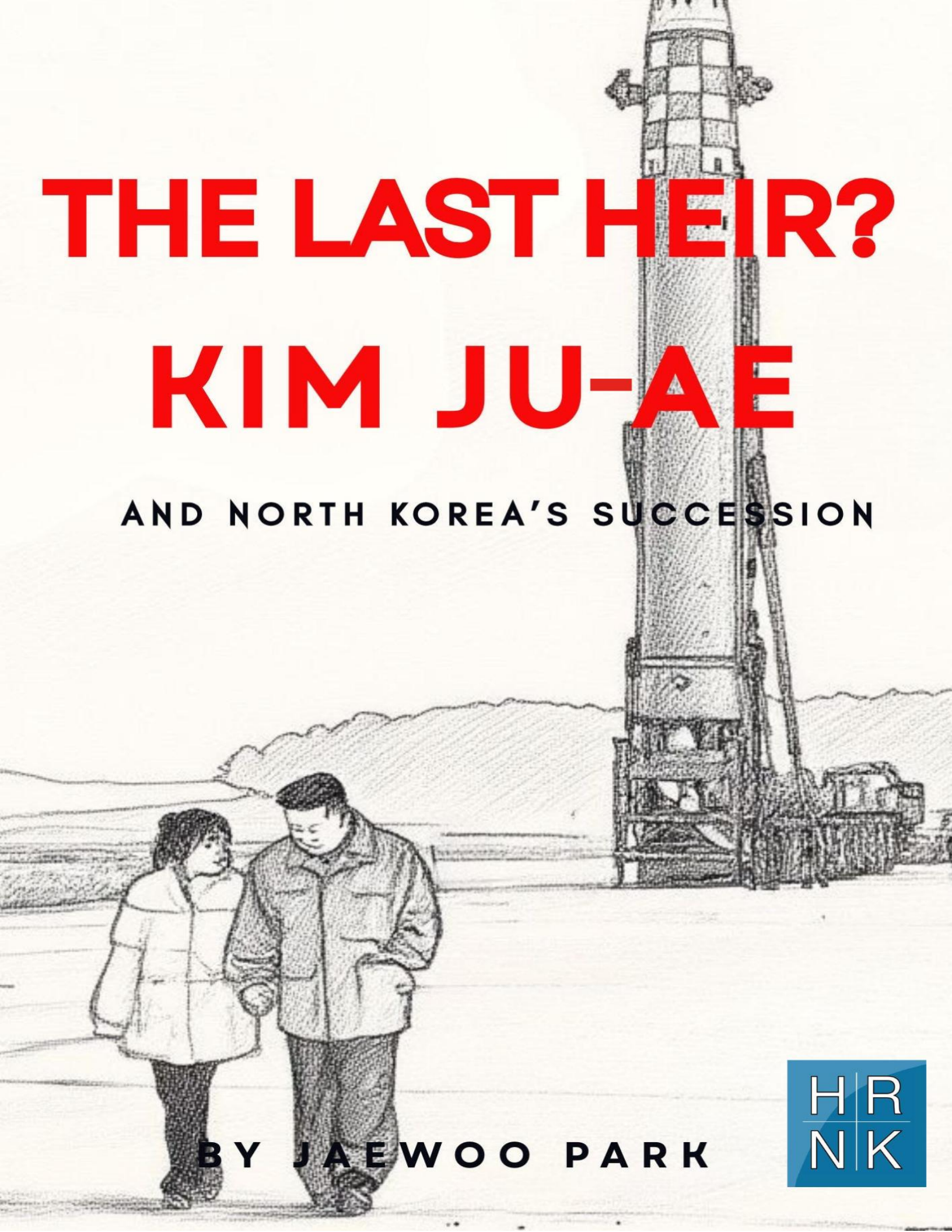
THE LAST HEIR?

KIM JU-AE

AND NORTH KOREA'S SUCCESSION



BY JAEWOO PARK

HRNK

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Printed in the United States of America

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Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

1801 F Street NW, Suite 305

Washington, DC 20006

P: (202) 499-7970

www.hrnk.org

DOI: https://doi.org/10.69981/4770

ISBN: 978-1-959391-08-1

e-ISBN: 978-1-959391-07-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025947199

Cover Images: ©HRNK Editorial Consultant design via Canva.com

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About The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) is the leading U.S.-based nonpartisan, non-governmental organization (NGO) in the field of North Korean human rights research and advocacy, tasked to focus international attention on human rights abuses in that country. It is HRNK's mission to persistently remind policymakers, opinion leaders, and the public that more than 20 million North Koreans need our attention.

Since its establishment in October 2001, HRNK has played an important intellectual leadership role in North Korean human rights issues by publishing over 60 major reports (available at https://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php). Recent reports have addressed North Korea's system of detention facilities, including its political prison camps, the role of security agencies and key institutions involved in human rights violations, North Korea's practice of dispatching workers overseas, and the connection between security issues and human rights when addressing North Korea. HRNK received UN ECOSOC consultative status in April 2018. It was also the first organization to propose that the human rights situation in North Korea be addressed by the UN Security Council. HRNK was directly and actively involved in all stages of the process, supporting the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean human rights. Its' reports have been cited numerous times in the report of the COI, the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights, a report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, two reports of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and several U.S. Department of State Democratic People's Republic of Korea Human Rights Reports. HRNK has also regularly been invited to provide expert testimony before the U.S. Congress and to speak before UN bodies including the General Assembly.

About the Author

Jaewoo Park is a journalist specializing in North Korea. He graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and spent nearly five years reporting on foreign affairs and national security in South Korea before relocating to the United States. He is now in his third year as a reporter at Radio Free Asia (RFA), a U.S. government-funded news organization that delivers uncensored, independent journalism to countries in Asia where press freedom is restricted.

Founded in 1996 in response to the Tiananmen Square massacre, RFA broadcasts in nine Asian languages and covers sensitive topics that are often subject to censorship by authoritarian regimes. Park contributes daily reporting on North Korea, with the mission of expanding access to reliable information for the North Korean people.

In October 2023, Park made headlines with an investigative report analyzing the use of North Korean-made weapons by Hamas during its surprise attack on Israel. The report prompted direct condemnation from North Korean state media, which labeled him a "reptile media" journalist.

Following the public emergence of Kim Ju-ae, Park published exclusive interviews with a former classmate of Kim Jong-un from his school days in Switzerland, and the manager of former NBA star Dennis Rodman as well as Dennis Rodman himself, who visited North Korea. These reports—suggesting that Kim may not have a son—sparked significant public interest in South Korea.

Park has since continued to deepen his coverage of North Korea's hereditary succession system through interviews with renowned North Korea experts, fashion analysts, and psychologists in both South Korea and the United States.

Awards

Silver Medal, 2025 New York Festivals Radio Awards (News Report/Feature category)

Foreword

Thirty-six years after the end of the Cold War, the North Korean regime has not only managed to outlive its former Communist fraternal allies. It has managed to accomplish two hereditary transmissions of power. In July 1994, from grandfather and founder Kim Il-sung to son Kim Jong-il. In December 2011, from son Kim Jong-il to grandson Kim Jong-un. Is a third hereditary transmission of power possible in North Korea? That is the question author Jaewoo Park's brilliant report aims to address.

Since its establishment, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been an androcentric political system. Could North Korea have a female leader moving forward? According to Jaewoo Park's analysis, grounded in thorough open-source research as well as interviews with experts and key witnesses aware of the nature and dynamics of the Kim family regime, including senior defectors and Dennis Rodman, that is certainly a possibility.

As HRNK report author Robert Collins points out in his September 2019 landmark report on the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), "the possibility of a woman becoming the ruler in North Korea's male-dominated society would be difficult to defend domestically," especially since her children would belong to a different family, by strict Korean traditional heredity standards. And yet, who would be in charge of succession? Certainly, the OGD would play a critical role. Jaewoo Park's landmark report explains why a female leader of North Korea would not be outside the realm of possibility, especially a female leader representing the fourth generation of the Kim Family Regime.

Nobody will know for sure until the disappearance of the current leader and until North Korea's OGD passes final judgment on succession. Is the OGD ready for a third hereditary transmission of power? Absolutely. The North Korean Workers' Party and its most powerful agency, the OGD, are in a symbiotic relationship with the Supreme Leaders of the Kim Family Regime, having ruled with an iron hand, through indoctrination, coercion, control, surveillance, and punishment, for almost eight decades.



Greg Scarlatoiu
President and CEO
Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)
Washington, D.C.
September 24, 2025

Prologue

The Girl Who Appeared Beside Kim Jong-un

In a country known as the most secretive on Earth, few moments are more carefully choreographed than public appearances by its leader. But in September 2022, an unexpected detail caught international attention.

On September 9, 2022, North Korea celebrated the 74th anniversary of its founding with a ceremony in Pyongyang. Footage released by state-run *Korean Central Television* (*KCTV*) showed about 40 children singing a patriotic anthem, *"The Three-colored National Flag of the Republic, Flutter High!"* North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was seen smiling broadly in the audience, while his sister, Kim Yo-jong, wiped away tears as she sang along.

Yet one child on stage stood out from the rest.

Weeks later, the British tabloid *Daily Mail*[1] reported that a girl among the performers could be Kim Jong-un's daughter, Kim Ju-ae. Unlike the other children, she wore a white hairband and matching white socks, drawing attention. The report also noted that *KCTV* gave her unusually close camera focus, and that First Lady Ri Sol-ju was seen gently placing her hand on the girl's shoulder in a seemingly affectionate exchange.

South Korean reporters asked the Ministry of Unification whether the girl was indeed Kim Ju-ae. The ministry offered no confirmation. At the time, the speculation seemed like a fleeting tabloid moment. But it would soon become clear: this was only the beginning.

Two months later, in November 2022, North Korea released photos of Kim Jong-un overseeing the launch of the Hwasong-17, an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Standing beside him was a young girl in a white puffer coat—calm, smiling, and unmistakably placed at the center of attention. North Korean state media called her his "beloved daughter." She was Kim Ju-ae.

The moment was unprecedented. It was the first time the child of a North Korean leader—let alone a dictator from a dynastic regime—had been publicly introduced. The global response was immediate. According to Google Trends, searches[2] for "Kim Jong-un daughter" quickly overtook interest in "North Korea ICBM." Search traffic peaked on November 19, the day the first photos were released, and surged again after more images appeared the next day.

At first, analysts hesitated to call her a successor-in-training. But nearly three years on, a growing number of observers believe Kim Jong-un may be grooming Kim Ju-ae to become the fourth-generation ruler of North Korea.

In retrospect, it is clear that her debut was no accident but a carefully calculated move.

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[1] Michael Havis, "Is This Kim Jong-un's Child? Chinese Experts Believe North Korea Tyrant's Daughter Has Been Caught on Camera in Low-Key Stage Debut with His Wife," *Daily Mail* (MailOnline), September 23, 2022, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11242149/Is-Kim-Jong-uns-CHILD-Chinese-experts-believe-North-Korea-tyrants-daughter-seen-event.html.

[2] Chang Gyu Ahn and Jinwoo Cho, "Kim Jong-un's Daughter' Tops Google Search Terms Related to North Korea… Ahead of ICBM," *Radio Free Asia* (RFA), November 25, 2022, https://www.rfa.org/korean/news_indepth/googletrend-11252022105531.html.

North Korean media—completely controlled by the ruling Workers' Party—likely followed orders from the party's powerful Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD). According to defector and former propaganda official Jang Jin-sung,[3] when North Korean media reports are aimed at foreign audiences, they typically follow instructions handed down through the PAD. Those instructions are then implemented across state newspapers, television broadcasts, and even in messaging aimed at South Korea and the international press. In this case, Ju-ae's appearance was likely staged not just for a domestic audience, but for the world to see.

Soon after, media outlets across the globe began using her name: Kim Ju-ae. But the name had first surfaced years earlier. In February 2013, former NBA star Dennis Rodman made headlines when he visited Pyongyang. In an interview with the British newspaper *The Sun*, Rodman revealed that he had met Kim Jong-un and his wife, Ri Sol-ju. He mentioned that Ri spoke fondly of their "beautiful little daughter."

Seven months later, after a second visit to North Korea, Rodman gave an interview to *The Guardian*[4] in which he said he had met their daughter—and even held her. That's when her name was publicly revealed for the first time.

> "I held their baby Ju-ae and spoke with Ms Ri [Sol-ju, Kim's wife] as well. He's a good dad and has a beautiful family. Kim told me, "'I'll see you in December"
> — *Dennis Rodman, The Guardian, September 2013*

The existence of a potential fourth-generation successor in Northeast Asia's only dynastic dictatorship was now public knowledge. But it wasn't until a decade later that the world saw her face.

Interestingly, earlier *KCTV* footage—featuring a child once mistaken for Kim Ju-ae—has since disappeared from state archives without explanation.

The "Last Game" With Dennis Rodman

In March 2025, the Trump administration proposed sweeping budget cuts to the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which oversees Radio Free Asia. Practically overnight, all federal funding to RFA was frozen—without warning or clear guidance.

Radio Free Asia, created by the U.S. Congress in 1996, is a congressionally funded news organization that broadcasts in nine languages—Mandarin, Cantonese, Uyghur, Tibetan, Korean, Khmer, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Lao. Its mission: to deliver uncensored news to people living under authoritarian regimes. According to defectors, RFA's Korean-language programs still occasionally make it past the border into North Korea, offering rare glimpses of a world beyond the regime's grasp.

The funding freeze wasn't just a bureaucratic inconvenience—it was an existential threat. RFA, along with its employee union, filed a lawsuit against USAGM to challenge the decision. But for weeks, nothing moved. No funding. No clarity. No end in sight.

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[3] Jang Jin-sung, telephone interview by Jaewoo Park, March 2024.
[4] Peter Walker, "Dennis Rodman Gives Away Name of Kim Jong-un's Daughter," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/dennis-rodman-north-korea-baby-name.

For me, the stakes were personal. My wife and I were expecting our first child. We had just moved into a new home. Bills were piling up. Paychecks were uncertain. And most administrative functions at RFA had ground to a halt.

Yet amid the silence and stalling, I made a choice: I would move forward with a project I had put off for too long.

Together with longtime colleague and video producer Jun You, I set out from Washington, D.C., to New Jersey. Our mission: to find and interview Dennis Rodman—the unlikely basketball diplomat who first revealed to the world the existence of Kim Jong-un's daughter, Kim Ju-ae.

I had previously interviewed people who accompanied Rodman on his trips to North Korea, but I had never spoken to Rodman himself. When I learned he would be attending a fan event at a New Jersey convention center on April 6, 2025—offering autographs and photo ops—I knew I had to go. It was a four-hour drive, but this might be my last chance.

As we drove through the springtime landscapes of the U.S. East Coast, a rush of memories filled my mind—memories of stories I had chased during my time at RFA. I remembered the day North Korea denounced me by name after one of my reports, calling me a "puppet journalist." I recalled traveling to Africa and meeting actual North Korean workers officially dispatches there, not defectors. But the dream that haunted me most was the one I never realized: setting foot in North Korea as a journalist. I had long hoped to document the country firsthand. Now, I wondered: If RFA shut down, could I continue covering North Korea on my own? Would I still have a voice?

In the haze of uncertainty, I focused on one thing: this meeting with Rodman might be my final assignment.

Getting an interview with him wasn't easy. After his visits to North Korea and during the Trump-Kim summits, Rodman gave interviews to major media outlets—reportedly for substantial appearance fees. I tried contacting his agents. I reached out to people close to him. Nothing worked. I had already passed on two previous chances to attend similar fan events in 2023. I didn't want to miss this one.

I was also nervous about Rodman himself. Famously unpredictable and eccentric, he was known as the "troublemaker." A well-known story from his 2013 trip to Pyongyang tells of him getting drunk at a banquet and walking up to Kim Jong-un, face to face, saying:[5]

"Your grandfather and your father did some bad things, but you are trying to change something. I love you, man."

The other Americans were horrified. But Kim reportedly laughed it off.

Rodman's behavior in the U.S. hadn't been much less dramatic. At the 2018 U.S.–North Korea summit in Singapore, he cried on CNN while describing his emotions over the Trump and Kim meeting. He was infamous even in Hollywood for his unpredictability.

[5] ABC News, "Dennis Rodman Held Kim Jong-un's Daughter, Scolds Obama," *ABC News (US)*, September 9, 2013, https://abcnews.go.com/International/dennis-rodman-held-kim-jong-uns-daughter-scolds/story?id=20201224.

And yet, despite his reputation as a sideshow, Rodman's visits to North Korea were no joke. In January 2014, he traveled to Pyongyang for a basketball game to mark Kim Jong-un's birthday. He defended the trip fiercely. In an interview with CNN,[6] he said, *"This is a great idea for the world."*

He lashed out at critics, saying: *"People always judge what I do."*

When asked about Kenneth Bae, a Korean American being held in North Korea, Rodman controversially suggested Bae had done something wrong. When the anchor pressed him about Kim Jong-un's brutal leadership—including the execution of his own uncle—Rodman snapped:[7]

"I don't give a damn what they think about me. You're the guy behind the mic right now."

Now, I was about to meet that same man. And all my concerns—every bit of anxiety—were unfounded.

Rodman greeted me warmly. I introduced myself as a journalist who reports on North Korea. I told him I had seen all the footage of his visits and had been deeply moved. We talked for about four or five minutes—short, but unforgettable.

Me: "Did you know you're the only person in the world known to have met Kim Jong-un's daughter?"
Rodman: "Yeah." *(He mimicked cradling a baby in his arms.)* "She was just a little baby."

I showed him a photo of Kim Ju-ae on my phone and captured the moment on camera.

Me: "This is her now. Do you remember?"
Rodman: *"Oh my gosh—she's grown so much."*

It was a powerful moment. But oddly enough, the man who first introduced Kim Ju-ae's name to the world no longer remembered it.

Before I left, I asked him whether he had seen any other children—perhaps a son—during his 2013 visit to Wonsan.

Rodman: "There were other family members around, but I didn't see any boys."

This testimony aligned precisely with interviews I conducted with foreign figures who had either spoken directly with Kim Jong-un about his children or have seen his family members in person. If true, the implications are clear: contrary to earlier assumptions that his firstborn was a son, the publicly introduced Kim Ju-ae may, in fact, be his eldest child. And if Kim is indeed preparing for hereditary succession, it suggests that Kim Ju-ae could be the designated heir. While the possibility remains that a younger son exists, no such information has been confirmed.

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[6] Michael Pearson, Jethro Mullen, and Laura Smith-Spark, "Dennis Rodman's Rant in North Korea: I Don't Give a Damn," *CNN*, January 7, 2014, https://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/08/world/asia/north-korea-dennis-rodman.
[7] Laura Smith-Spark and Jethro Mullen, "Angry Dennis Rodman Defends North Korea Basketball Game," *FOX 13 Now*, January 6, 2014, https://www.fox13now.com/2014/01/06/dennis-rodman-nba-old-timers-arrive-in-north-korea-for-basketball-game.

The Last of the Paektu Bloodline

In most countries, it is customary for children to inherit their father's surname. North Korea is no exception. If Kim Ju-ae were to become the successor to Kim Jong-un, her child would be the first leader of the so-called "Paektu bloodline" without the Kim surname, potentially breaking the dynastic naming tradition. While the possibility of cousin marriages or other dynastic manipulations exists under North Korea's opaque system, especially considering its monarchic characteristics, such scenarios are hard to imagine from a regime that has historically purged its own relatives.

A comparable precedent is found in the British royal family: King Charles III inherited the royal name through his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, rather than his father. Some analysts[8] suggest Kim Jong-un may pursue a similar strategy to pass on the Paektu legacy through his daughter, but whether North Koreans would accept such a shift is questionable. Could Kim Jong-un truly pass down authority to Kim Ju-ae, potentially making her the first female leader of a communist state?

Due to North Korea's extreme secrecy, even elite insiders have limited knowledge of the inner workings of the Kim family. Still, both the South Korean Ministry of Unification and the National Intelligence Service (NIS) believe it is increasingly plausible that Kim Ju-ae is being groomed as a successor—though they caution that the future remains uncertain given her young age.

In contrast to his predecessors, who shunned public family disclosures, Kim Jong-un introduced his 10-year-old daughter to the world, sparking global discussion about succession. While leadership analysis alone cannot fully define a nation, examining cultural, political, historical, and international contexts is crucial. As former NIS Deputy Director Han Ki-bum noted,[9] one must avoid falling into a "supreme leader determinism" and instead analyze North Korea's broader power dynamics. Similarly, Hwang Jang-yop—North Korea's highest-ranking defector and chief architect of *Juche* ideology—dismissed the importance of Kim Jong-un's succession, once famously saying, "Who cares about that brat?"[10]

Yet it would be a mistake to disregard how individual leaders can shape regimes and reflect the times in which they rule. Adolf Hitler, born in Austria, was shaped by personal trauma and national humiliation after World War I, channeling that into authoritarian nationalism. Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer stationed in East Germany, experienced the Soviet collapse not just as geopolitical turmoil but as personal loss—an experience that heavily influenced his authoritarian vision to rebuild Russia's past glory.

The unusual relationship between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un also reflects how personal dynamics can alter geopolitics. Trump, raised in New York with a businessman's flair for negotiation, sought historic diplomatic breakthroughs with North Korea. Kim Jong-un's own willingness to meet Trump was equally rooted in his personal boldness and taste for risk. Leadership traits, when studied closely, can explain surprising geopolitical turns—including summit diplomacy that defied decades of hostility.

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[8] *Chosun Ilbo*, "[만물상] 후계자 김주애?" ["Everything: Successor Kim Ju-ae?"], January 4, 2024, https://www.chosun.com/opinion/manmulsang/2024/01/04/KCXRVQ7GMVBJHLDRLB5AGSACYU.

[9] Han Gi-beom (한기범), *북한은 왜 경제개혁에 실패하는가?* [*Why Does North Korea Fail in Microeconomic Reform?*] (Seonin [선인], 2023), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000211545394.

[10] Hwang Jang-yop, remarks at a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) event, Washington, DC, March 2010.

Likewise, examining Kim Ju-ae's potential role—and what her emergence signals to North Korea's elite—provides valuable insight into the regime's future direction. Even though some scholars argue that succession isn't the most important issue in understanding North Korea, veteran U.S. intelligence analyst Ken Gause, who has spent over 20 years studying the regime, stated,[11] "The issues that keep me up at night are Kim Jong-un's health and the succession question. These could lead to bloodshed or even regime collapse."

Kim Ju-ae's political ascent may well mark a turning point for the Korean Peninsula. Her emergence has already raised questions and sparked internal power shifts among North Korea's ruling elite. At a minimum, her rise ensures that North Koreans will remain under dynastic authoritarian rule into a fourth generation—likely intensifying the regime's insularity.

As a journalist specializing in North Korea, I have investigated every available clue to better understand Kim Jong-un's preparations for hereditary succession. Most Koreans are understandably curious about Kim Ju-ae, even if ethical questions remain about focusing on a 12-year-old child. Nonetheless, her growing presence and signs of planned dynastic transition make this an urgent and unavoidable issue to explore.

Chapter 1 — Why Hereditary Dictatorship Works in North Korea

The Military as Guardian of the System

"Glory to the officers and soldiers of the heroic Korean People's Army."

This was the speech delivered by Kim Jong-il on April 25, 1992, during a military parade celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army (KPA). It remains the only known audio of Kim Jong-il's voice released by North Korea's state media—a striking indication of how highly the regime prioritizes its military.

One of the key reasons North Korea has been able to sustain an unprecedented three-generation hereditary succession is that the KPA is not merely a military organization but the central pillar of regime maintenance. North Korea has carefully built a military-first system, combining ideological indoctrination based on nationalism and self-reliance with a vast surveillance network that eliminates potential dissent. As a result, the military functions as both a tool of repression and a guarantor of dynastic succession.

According to South Korea's 2023 Defense White Paper, North Korea's regular military force comprises approximately 1.28 million troops—nearly three times the size of South Korea's 470,000. When reservists (7.62 million) are included, the total number reaches 8.9 million, making North Korea the most militarized society in terms of population-to-troop ratio. Nearly one-third of the population is affiliated with the military in some way. Correspondingly, defense spending accounts for an enormous share of national output. In 2024, the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) estimated that North Korea spends 36.3% of its GDP on military expenditures—second only to Ukraine, which was in its third year of war.

[11] Ken Gause, interview by Jaewoo Park, in person, February 2024.

Conscription in North Korea is also intense. As of 2023,[12] combat soldiers served up to 10 years, and those in strategic units (such as missile forces) served up to 13. Roughly 20% of men between the ages of 16 and 54 are on active duty. Among those aged 18 to 27, the figure reaches as high as 30%. Women reportedly make up around 20% of the military.

For ordinary North Koreans, the KPA is portrayed as a noble institution that defends the homeland. This perception is a product of decades of propaganda and the military-first politics of the Kim Jong-il era. According to Lee So-yeon,[13] a defector who served in the 4th Corps of the KPA, soldiers enjoy considerable social prestige, especially women who voluntarily enlist and rise to non-commissioned officer or officer ranks. After discharge, they are often offered Workers' Party membership, job promotions, and social privileges.

In 2024, when North Korean soldiers were deployed to Russia, diaries[14] recovered from fallen troops suggested that the promise of Workers' Party membership motivated many to volunteer. One diary read:

"In return for the deep love and trust of our respected Comrade Kim Jong-un, I pledge to prepare myself with unbreakable ideological strength like the anti-Japanese revolutionaries. I earnestly request admission into the glorious Workers' Party of Korea."

Party membership is the key to upward mobility in North Korea, providing access to better housing, supplies, healthcare, education, and influence. Even ministers and provincial governors are under party surveillance. Lee So-yeon, who joined the army in 1992, came from a privileged background—her father taught revolutionary history at Kim Jong-suk Teachers' College and had connections with military elites. That status helped her join the military, pursue party membership, and gain social standing.

Similarly, defector Lee Hyun-seung,[15] an elite from Pyongyang Foreign Language School who would typically have been exempt from military service, enlisted in the KPA out of a sense of duty and to prove loyalty to the regime. For aspiring elites, military service is often the gateway to power.

Yet the reality is that the KPA leadership is primarily loyal to the Kim family—not the people. From its foundation, the army has functioned as a mechanism of personal rule. Kim Il-sung solidified control over the military by placing trusted comrades from his anti-Japanese guerrilla days into key posts[16]—Choe Yong-gon as commander-in-chief, Kang Kon as chief of staff, and others. These anti-Japanese fighters became the political and military base for Kim's emerging cult of personality.

Although the KPA was officially established on February 8, 1948, Kim Il-sung later changed the founding date to April 25, 1932—the day he claimed to have created the "Korean People's Revolutionary Army"—to link the military's birth to his personal revolutionary myth. This historical revisionism reinforced his divine image.

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[12] Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, s.v. "Korea, North," updated August 27, 2025, accessed September 1, 2025, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-north.

[13] Lee So-yeon, interview by Jaewoo Park, virtual, September 2024.

[14] Ahn Chang Gyu, "North Korea Grants Party Membership to Its Fallen Soldiers in Ukraine War," *Radio Free Asia* (RFA), January 21, 2025, https://www.rfa.org/english/korea/2025/01/21/north-korea-workers-party-membership-card.

[15] Lee Hyun-seung, interview by author, in person, March 2024.

[16] Kim Seon-ho (김선호), *조선인민군* [*Korean People's Army (KPA)*] (Hanyang University Press [한양대학교 출판부], 2020), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001113759.

During the Korean War, the KPA's prestige rose significantly. Guerrilla fighters who had fought alongside Kim in Manchuria and then shed blood in the war were elevated to powerful positions, while highly educated elites were purged. These replacements, loyal but often unqualified, contributed to North Korea's emphasis on heavy industry and militarization over consumer welfare.[17] In contrast to South Korea's flexible military spending, North Korea viewed military strength as the ultimate expression of national power.

By the 1990s, Kim Jong-il, who lacked a military background, faced internal skepticism. His limited military training during university cast doubt on his leadership.[18] Nevertheless, he gradually brought the KPA under the Workers' Party's control. When the country entered the "Arduous March" of the mid-1990s—a period of economic collapse and famine—Kim bolstered the military's role by officially declaring *songun* (military-first) politics. The military became a political actor in addition to a defense force.

Under Kim Jong-un, the era of military-first politics was ostensibly replaced by a return to party-centric governance. He disbanded the National Defense Commission (국방위원회)—once the regime's top power organ—and replaced it with the State Affairs Commission. According to Ri Il-gyu,[19] a former North Korean diplomat in Cuba who defected in 2023, Kim feared that unchecked military power could lead to a coup and therefore concentrated authority in the party. This allowed him to solidify control while purging military elites.

Soon after taking power, Kim purged high-ranking officers like Chief of General Staff Ri Yong-ho (2012) and Minister of the People's Armed Forces Hyon Yong-chol (2015). He replaced them with loyalists from families of guerrilla fighters. Military promotions and demotions became frequent tools of control. For example, Pak Jong-chon, a senior general with close ties to Kim, saw his rank fluctuate repeatedly. Hwang Pyong-so, once director of the General Political Bureau, was demoted six ranks in 2017 and forced to sweep the Workers' Party courtyard as punishment for a linguistic slip in a report to Kim.[20] After a fire broke out in the bureau's internal network system, Hwang described Kim's office as a mere "office (사무실)" instead of the more respectful term "executive office (집무실)," and said documents had been "handed over (넘겨준다)" to the Central Committee—phrasing Kim took as disrespectful. Offended by what he saw as a failure to uphold the dignity of the Party, Kim ordered Hwang's "revolutionary reeducation," resulting in the humiliating punishment.

The KPA has thus evolved from a war-fighting institution into a mechanism of dynastic preservation. Kim Il-sung molded it through war and purges. Kim Jong-il elevated its political status. Kim Jong-un reasserted party dominance and purged potential threats. His nuclear tests, particularly between 2013 and 2017, were both strategic and symbolic—demonstrating his authority as commander-in-chief.

Now, with speculation that Kim Jong-un may be grooming his daughter Kim Ju-ae as a potential successor, the military's absolute loyalty remains critical. A female leader in a deeply patriarchal, militarized system would face unprecedented challenges, making control of the KPA more important than ever.

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[17] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[18] Jeong Yeong-tae (정영태), *북한의 국방위원장 통치체제의 특성과 정책전망* [*The Characteristics and Policy Prospects of North Korea's National Defense Commission Chairmanship System*] (Korea Institute for National Unification [통일연구원], 2000), https://repo.kinu.or.kr/retrieve/432 (accessed September 18, 2025).

[19] Ministry of Unification, *Global Korea Forum (GKF) 2024* (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2024).

[20] Ri Il-gyu, remarks at *Global Korea Forum (GKF) 2024*, hosted by the Ministry of Unification, Seoul, 2024.

Could There Be a Coup From Within?

Speculation about a possible military coup in North Korea gained renewed attention in 2023, when Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of Russia's Wagner Group, launched a short-lived rebellion against President Vladimir Putin during the war in Ukraine. The incident raised questions: could a similar mutiny unfold in Pyongyang?

One U.S.-based expert[21] suggested that Russia's rebellion might inspire potential dissent within the North Korean military, calling it a nightmare scenario for leader Kim Jong-un. But analysts agree that North Korea's unique political system makes such a coup highly unlikely.

Thae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat who defected to South Korea and later served as a lawmaker, said[22] the North Korean military is structurally designed to prevent any insurrection. The capital is protected by elite units under Kim's direct command, including the Supreme Guard Command and the Pyongyang Defense Command. Even if these units were to conspire together, the presence of powerful internal security forces like the Ministry of State Security (formerly the State Security Department) and the Ministry of Social Security (formerly the Ministry of People's Security) would make a coordinated coup exceedingly difficult.

In addition, surveillance and counterintelligence measures within the military are specifically tailored to prevent any thoughts of rebellion.

That said, North Korea is not entirely immune to internal plots. There have been at least two historically significant cases of attempted coups, both of which were decisively quashed by the regime.

In 1992, the so-called 'Frunze Military Academy coup plot' unfolded when North Korean officers studying in the Soviet Union began voicing discontent after witnessing the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Influenced by these developments, they planned to assassinate Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il during a military parade on April 25. The plot was foiled thanks to North Korea's intelligence apparatus, leading to a mass purge. More than 200 military personnel linked to the conspiracy were executed, and Pyongyang stopped sending officers abroad for military training.

Another serious incident occurred in 1995 in North Hamgyong Province. Amid growing economic hardship during the "Arduous March," senior officers in the Sixth Army Corps reportedly plotted a rebellion. The corps' political officer, frustrated with the regime's failure to address the crisis, attempted to build a movement to overthrow Kim Jong-il. He tried to do so without informing the corps commander, Kim Yong-chun. Sensing the unrest, Kim alerted the military's security division, which suppressed the coup before it could unfold. Around 40 senior officers were executed, and hundreds of soldiers were sent to political prison camps or mines. The Sixth Army Corps was dissolved and replaced by a newly formed 9th Corps. Kim Yong-chun, for his loyalty, was promoted and went on to serve in key posts, including chief of the General Staff and vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, before his death in 2018.

These incidents, though rooted in external shocks and economic desperation, ultimately reinforced the Kim family's determination to tighten their grip on the military. In the aftermath, the regime doubled down on

[21] Donald Kirk, "How the Rebellion in Russia Could Inspire an Overthrow in North Korea," *The Hill*, July 6, 2023, https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4082100-how-the-rebellion-in-russia-could-inspire-an-overthrow-in-north-korea.
[22] Thae Yong-ho, Facebook post, June 2023.

surveillance and built an internal balance of control and reward that keeps the military both subordinate and institutionally privileged.

While North Korea remains opaque and unpredictable, most experts believe that its layered security apparatus and the centralization of power around Kim Jong-un continue to make a military coup an unlikely prospect.

The Nuclear Program as a Pillar of Regime Stability

When analyzing the KPA, it is impossible to overlook the pivotal role of nuclear weapons. North Korea's nuclear obsession, by most accounts, stems from a long-standing fear of nuclear force itself. This fear dates back to the Korean War in the early 1950s, when U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur proposed the use of nuclear weapons. Since then, North Korea's trajectory evolved from peaceful nuclear energy research during the Cold War to a militarized nuclear development strategy, largely triggered by the collapse of the socialist bloc and the regime's growing insecurity.[23]

The 1957 deployment of U.S. nuclear arms in South Korea underlined Pyongyang's security anxieties. In response, the North outwardly pushed for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, all the while covertly nurturing nuclear ambitions. The Gulf War of 1990, in which a militarily powerful Iraq swiftly fell to U.S. forces, solidified Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's resolve to pursue nuclear arms. The 1994 crisis further fueled Pyongyang's fears when Washington under the Clinton administration reportedly considered preemptive strikes. Continuous military pressure from the U.S. has since served as justification for North Korea's ongoing nuclear pursuit.

The trajectory escalated following the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. In 2002, President George W. Bush labeled North Korea part of the "axis of evil," prompting the regime's formal declaration of nuclear possession in February 2005.

Today, Pyongyang uses its nuclear arsenal as more than a shield from foreign intervention. It also serves as an internal deterrent against potential coups. Kim Jong-un has implicitly threatened that any attempt to remove him would result in catastrophic national security consequences. This strategy sends a clear message to foreign actors: regime change could unleash chaos, war, and refugee crises.

North Korea believes its nuclear capabilities deter plans such as those reportedly explored by the CIA. During the Trump administration, the agency was said to have crafted multiple war plans, including Operations Plan 5027 and 5015, aimed at preemptive leadership decapitation. In October 2017, the U.S. Air Force simulated bombing campaigns over Missouri terrain resembling North Korean landscapes.[24] When then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo met Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang in March 2018, the North Korean leader reportedly quipped, "I didn't think you'd show up. I know you've been trying to kill me."[25]

This underscores Kim's effort to tie his survival to the integrity of North Korea's nuclear chain of command. Control over the nuclear arsenal is tightly centralized, rendering it nearly impossible for military factions to use

[23] Kim Bo-mi, *The Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons: The Beginning and Growth of North Korea's Nuclear Program in the 1950s and 1960s*, KINU Research Paper (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2024).
[24] Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
[25] Mike Pompeo, *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for the America I Love* (New York: Broadside Books, 2023).

the weapons without Kim's consent. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently told Congress that Kim is "using nuclear weapons as an insurance policy for regime survival."

Nuclear development in North Korea is not merely a show of military might. It is an ideological asset designed to deter dissent, bolster nationalism, and justify dynastic rule. In a country with an economy one-sixtieth the size of South Korea's,[26] nuclear status instills pride and unity. The regime promotes a narrative that blames sanctions not on its own weapons programs but on the unilateral hostility of the United States. According to surveys[27] of over 1,000 defectors who fled North Korea between the late 1980s and 1990s, about 67% believed that famine and hardship were caused by external enemies.

North Korea connects its nuclear drive to the spirit of anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance and has rebranded the nuclear arsenal as a modern manifestation of that legacy. By framing nuclear power as a source of national dignity and the ultimate deterrent against a return to colonial subjugation, the regime positions itself as the only guardian of Korean sovereignty.

The ultimate goal of the Kim family, however, has always been regime continuity. The more international pressure and sanctions they face, the more indispensable the nuclear deterrent becomes. Experts believe Pyongyang could eventually amass over 300 nuclear warheads if left unchecked.[28] To counter U.S. missile defense plans, which could intercept roughly 32 incoming warheads by 2026, North Korea is reportedly aiming to build more than 35 strategic nuclear weapons to overwhelm U.S. capabilities.[29]

With denuclearization talks having repeatedly failed, North Korea is shifting toward arms control negotiations where it may trade limits, not disarmament, for concessions. Once, progressive voices in South Korea claimed the North would give up its nuclear program in exchange for regime guarantees. Today, such optimism has faded.

To cement the nuclear legacy for future generations, Kim Jong-un has begun publicly grooming his daughter, Kim Ju-ae. She has appeared at key missile test sites, standing beside her father during intercontinental ballistic missile launches. This is widely interpreted as a symbolic move to position her as the next inheritor of nuclear nationalism. Even skeptics of the "Kim Ju-ae's succession" theory agree that her presence conveys one message clearly: North Korea's nuclear identity is built to last across generations.

Is an Uprising Possible?

In October 2011, a man was captured on video, bleeding as he was dragged toward a truck by soldiers. As someone screamed, "Save him! Save him!" gunshots rang out. The camera shook and cut to a different scene, and moments later, the man, now lifeless, was shown being loaded into an ambulance. This footage, broadcast

[26] Ministry of Unification, "North Korea Information Portal," https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/main/portalMain.do.
[27] Hyun-Joo Lee, "경제난 이후 북한 주민 충성도의 유지와 변화에 대한 연구 [A Research and Study on Sustenance and Change of Loyalty in North Korea after the Economic Crisis]," *북한연구학회보 [Journal of North Korean Studies]* 16, no. 2 (2012): 135–71, https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART001732268.
[28] Ankit Panda, in-person interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2025.
[29] Sarah Laderman, Nikita Degtyarev, Tianran Xu, Elin Bergner, and Marcy R. Fowler, *Fissile Material and Nuclear Force Structure in North Korea*, RUSI Occasional Paper (London: Royal United Services Institute, October 2024), https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/fissile-material-and-nuclear-force-structure-north-korea.

by Al Jazeera, depicted the final moments of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi's life, a moment that came to symbolize the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010–2011.

The movement had begun in Tunisia in December 2010 when 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest of police harassment. This sparked widespread anti-government protests that toppled regimes across the region, including in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Among them, Libya and Syria faced severe upheaval. Though the Assad regime survived with the backing of Russia and Iran, it ultimately collapsed on December 8, 2024. The fall of Syria's half-century-long dictatorship has prompted some to wonder if a similar collapse could occur in North Korea.

As of now, such a scenario appears unlikely. The Assad regime once envied North Korea's totalitarian grip and sought to emulate it. With North Korean guidance, it established a system of intense surveillance and oppression, disappearing dissidents without a trace. When Assad fell, many previously unaccounted-for detainees were miraculously freed. However, North Korea's domestic and geopolitical conditions differ substantially from Syria's. North Korea's regime was born out of a struggle for independence and built upon the ideology of *Juche* (self-reliance), granting it symbolic legitimacy. Syria's regime, by contrast, relied heavily on foreign powers for survival.

North Korea has not only eschewed external dependency but has invested heavily in building up its own military capabilities, including nuclear weapons. These efforts have served both to extend the regime's life and to fortify internal unity. While Syria became increasingly fragile during its civil war, North Korea doubled down on isolation, propaganda, and control, maintaining cohesion even under crushing international sanctions.

Throughout North Korea's history, predictions of regime collapse have repeatedly surfaced—during the famine of the 1990s, the deaths of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet none have materialized. Even during the "Arduous March" famine, where between 600,000 and 3 million estimated people reportedly died, armed rebellion was inconceivable for a populace deeply conditioned to obey. Kim Jong-il invoked his father's anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle as a metaphor, framing the suffering as a patriotic trial.

When Kim Il-sung died, there were doubts about whether Kim Jong-il, an enigmatic figure at the time, could secure power. Yet he did so with surprising stability. Similar doubts arose when Kim Jong-un assumed power, especially given the unprecedented nature of a third-generation hereditary dictatorship. Nonetheless, the regime remained intact, even as sanctions peaked and the pandemic isolated the country further. If anything, the last few years appear to have strengthened the regime's grip.

The late Professor Chung Byung-ho, author of a book called *Theater State North Korea*, once recounted an encounter in Pyongyang where a local guide told him, "We are prepared to endure hunger and sacrifice for politics." This encapsulates the ideological foundation of the North Korean state, which centers on revolution, national pride, and self-reliance as responses to Japanese colonialism. This ethos is ingrained across society and reinforced by relentless propaganda.

When Kim Jong-un makes a public appearance, crowds greet him with tears and applause. Defectors have testified that upon seeing the leader, they involuntarily wept, such was the power of indoctrination. From early childhood, North Koreans are taught to revere their "fatherly leader" and pledge loyalty against imperialist enemies, particularly the United States.

North Korean kindergartners call Americans "Yankee bastards," beat effigies of U.S. soldiers with sticks, and draw posters depicting their country's victory over the United States. A math textbook even includes problems like:

"In the first battle of the Korean War, the People's Army killed 265 Yankee bastards, and in the second battle, they killed 70 more. How many did they kill in total?"

In October 2024, some North Korean soldiers deployed to Russia reportedly committed suicide with grenades to avoid capture by Ukrainian forces. This has been interpreted as evidence of their extreme indoctrination, though fear of retaliation against their families or coercion within military ranks may also have played a role.

North Korea's obsession with ideological purity extends even to its diplomacy. A former Syrian diplomat stationed in Pyongyang once received a 110lb–132lb (50–60 kg) statue of Kim Il-sung as a farewell gift.[30] When he declined it due to its weight, North Korea insisted on delivering it to his home in Syria. Weekly visits by embassy staff followed, checking the statue's condition. When the diplomat finally threatened to dispose of it, they took it back.

Yet even with distorted historical narratives and collective trauma as ideological glue, there are limits. Hunger and poverty inevitably lead to discontent. And some North Koreans, aware of the South's economic success, are beginning to question the regime's narrative.

So why is there so little visible dissent?

The Kim dynasty has crafted a society where dissent is nearly impossible. Freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association are nonexistent. Punishment for subversion often extends to three generations of a family. Surveillance is pervasive. Every 20–40 households are grouped into *inminban* ("people's units," 인민반) overseen by a local leader who reports to state security. These leaders monitor everything from daily chores to participation in political events.

One form of internal surveillance is the infamous "lodging inspection," dramatized in the Korean soap opera *Crash Landing on You*, where unauthorized guests and unregistered residents are sought through surprise late-night raids.

Distrust is further cultivated by embedding secret police among citizens. Unauthorized gatherings of three or more people are prohibited. Professor Andrei Lankov calls it a 'ubiquitous surveillance system.' Mandatory meetings like "self-criticism sessions" have devolved into forums for self-criticism and mutual denunciation, ensuring the regime's psychological control.

Even domestic travel requires government approval. Visits to Pyongyang or border regions are heavily restricted. This immobility enables thorough background checks and the isolation of politically suspect individuals in mines and labor camps.

[30] Radio Free Asia, *"Syria–North Korea Ties: What's Next after Assad? | Radio Free Asia (RFA),"* YouTube video, December 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySheyA6U8eo&t=57s.

Foreigners who have lived in North Korea describe a suffocating environment. Soviet exchange students in the 1980s were barred from attending North Korean classes or visiting certain places.[31] A Chinese resident from the late 2010s noted that conversations with locals were banned unless pre-approved, and restaurants and stores for foreigners were strictly designated. Even accidental visits to local venues were met with polite but firm rejection.[32]

If such scrutiny was applied to temporary foreign residents, one can only imagine the level of surveillance imposed on North Koreans. The regime uses every tool—political prison camps, public executions, forced labor—to enforce obedience. According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification in 2024, there are five known political prison camps in North Korea, holding as many as 200,000 people. Most defectors report having witnessed public executions.

Through a potent mix of fear, ideology, and isolation, North Korea has built an extraordinary system of control. So far, it has worked. Whether it can withstand the cumulative pressures of modern information, economic stagnation, and the human desire for freedom remains to be seen.

Chapter 2 — Three Generations of Succession

What Succession Means in the North Korean Context

According to North Korea's official *Dictionary of the Korean Language* (조선말사전), the hereditary system is defined negatively as "a feudal relic in which social status, occupation, and property are passed down within a family from generation to generation in an old society." Does this mean North Korea admits it is an "old society"? However, North Korea claims its "revolutionary hereditary succession" differs from feudal dynastic inheritance or royal bloodline succession. It argues that hereditary succession within the working class's revolutionary cause is based on criteria of "leadership qualities and appearance." These criteria are highly subjective and can be transformed into propaganda following the selection of the supreme leader.

"It is highly irrational and historically inaccurate to blindly condemn the elevation of an outstanding individual related by blood to the leader as mere 'hereditary succession.'"
— North Korean propaganda booklet, 1990; Lee Young-jong, 2010, *Successor Kim Jong-un*

This emphasis on absolute loyalty to the leader suggests that Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, as blood relatives, are seen as the rightful bearers of Kim Il-sung's legacy.

The same booklet also states, "The successor to the leader must be chosen based solely on personal merit," specifying that "whether male or female, young or old, a person with exceptional qualities can be selected as successor." In other words, if a successor is from the Paektu bloodline, it does not matter if they are female or young, as long as they are chosen by the supreme leader.

Indeed, Kim Jong-un—only in his twenties—rose unexpectedly to the position of supreme leader. According to the Open Source Center of the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Song Mi-ran,

[31] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[32] Interview conducted by Jaewoo Park, July 2019.

once known as a "specialist successor writer" for *Rodong Sinmun*, reinforced Kim Jong-un's designation as successor in a November 6, 2008, editorial titled "Flame of Kangson," noting that "the average age of the third and fourth generations inheriting the revolutionary cause is 25."

There are no official procedures for power succession outlined in the Workers' Party of Korea Charter or the Socialist Constitution. No legal clauses exist for family-based rule either. However, North Korea operates under a higher norm regarding bloodline succession: the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology Leadership System of the Party*. This effectively codifies familial succession. Similar to the Ten Commandments in Christianity, it deifies the deeds of the Kim family and is an absolute rule that all North Koreans must memorize and strictly follow. While citizens may not know the constitution or party charter in detail, ignorance of the Ten Principles can lead to punishment. It is said that residents must be able to recite them even if awakened at night.

Originally, communist ideology treats the party's central leadership as an institution rather than a person. Stalin reinterpreted it around himself and advanced the theory of "centralized party leadership." North Korea went further by developing the "Leader theory," justifying single-family hereditary succession.[33] In this view, the "leader" (the Kim family) embodies the state, and the Workers' Party serves as an instrument supporting the leader. This framework has entrenched three-generation succession within the Paektu bloodline: Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un.

Article 10:
"The revolutionary cause of Juche pioneered by Kim Il-sung and led by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, and the songun revolutionary cause must be inherited and accomplished through generations."

Article 10, Section 2:
"Our Party and revolution's fate shall be forever carried on through the Paektu bloodline, continuously inheriting and developing the Juche revolutionary tradition and strictly maintaining its purity."

The framework of the Ten Principles was established in the mid-1960s during Kim Il-sung's consolidation of the cult of personality. A decisive turning point was the purge of the "Kapsan Faction" (갑산파)—a political group based in Yanggang Province—in 1967. Although initially allies in the revolution, the Kapsan faction opposed Kim Il-sung's dictatorship and was purged. During this process, Kim Il-sung's brother, Kim Yong-ju, took control of the Organization and Guidance Department and reinforced the Kim family's deification. The core power institutions preserving authority in North Korea are the Organization and Guidance Department and the Propaganda and Agitation Department. Kim Yong-ju established rules including the deification of Kim Il-sung, which became the foundation for the Ten Principles.

After Kim Jong-il was officially designated as successor, the Ten Principles were further strengthened. In 1974, the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party's One-Ideology System* were formally announced. As Kim Jong-il solidified his succession, the principles were revised to deepen the Kim family's deification: references expanded from "Kim Il-sung" to "Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il." From then on, the cult of personality intensified.

[33] In Ho Song (송인호), "북한의 '당의 유일적 영도체계 확립의 10대 원칙'에 대한 고찰 [A Study on the Ten Principles of the Monolithic Guidance System of North Korea]," ***법학논총*** [*Dankook Law Review*] 43, no. 1 (2019), https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART002456765.

Under Kim Jong-un, the Ten Principles were fully revised for the first time in 39 years. In June, the original principles—previously focused on Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il—were updated to emphasize Kim Jong-un's regime. As his cult accelerates, there is speculation that provisions related to him will be added to the Ten Principles. Although the text does not yet directly praise Kim Jong-un by name, given the intensification of his personality cult, it is likely that if and when Kim Ju-ae undergoes formal successor training, relevant clauses will be incorporated.

The well-known tale of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's quest for immortality, sending emissaries worldwide to find the elixir of life, illustrates dictators' desire for eternal rule. But as mortal beings, death is inevitable. According to Ian Robertson,[34] a psychology professor at Trinity College Dublin, fear of death is especially acute for narcissistic individuals. To cope, dictators attempt to establish dynasties, imagining their ego continuing through descendants, which makes death feel less terrifying. Ultimately, building a dynasty is almost an unavoidable impulse.

While this is not a defense of him, some analysts argue that Kim Il-sung—the first to establish a hereditary dynasty in a socialist state—had little choice. Having purged numerous rivals and built his legacy, placing his son on the throne was necessary to maintain his achievements. He closely observed the Soviet Union after Nikita Khrushchev's rise in 1953, witnessing the dismantling of Stalin's legacy, and monitored Mao Zedong's late-period succession struggles in the 1970s, including Lin Biao's failed coup. These events likely strengthened Kim Il-sung's resolve to pass power to Kim Jong-il.

The late political scientist Seo Dae-suk, who caused a sensation by debunking the "fake Kim Il-sung theory," offered a similar analysis. Seo argued that Kim Il-sung chose his son Kim Jong-il as successor to secure his power in his final years, guarantee his posthumous legacy, and ensure the continuity of the North Korean regime. He believed Kim Il-sung anticipated the consequences of Khruschev's de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union and understood the potential instability after his death.

"Ability to Fold Space-Time and Teleport": Kim Il-sung as Supreme Leader

According to North Korean lore, Kim Il-sung defeated Japanese forces with grenades made from pine cones and moved across battlefields with supernatural speed. His son Kim Jong-il, on the first day he picked up a golf club, reportedly made 11 consecutive holes-in-one. His grandson, Kim Jong-un, allegedly fired a gun at age three and drove a car off-road at eight. North Koreans are not oblivious to the absurdity of these tales. Yet Pyongyang insists on perpetuating this mythology—because the earlier such ideas are implanted, the deeper the sense of reverence and distance between the people and their rulers. Through early education, the regime tightens its grip on the population.

From the outside, it is difficult to understand how North Koreans could be swayed by such propaganda. But in a tightly closed society, shaped from childhood by relentless indoctrination, escaping that framework is nearly impossible. Conversely, outsiders often misread Kim Il-sung's rise to power as effortless—destiny rather than design. In reality, his consolidation of power was marked by intense struggle and repeated crises. While his

[34] Ian Robertson, interview by Jaewoo Park, March 2024.

brutal authoritarian rule deserves condemnation, his political skill in turning adversity into dominance should not be underestimated.

Kim Il-sung was born in 1912 in Mangyongdae, just outside Pyongyang, during Japan's colonial occupation of Korea. His father, Kim Hyong-jik (김형직), a devout Christian, named him Kim Song-ju (김성주). He would later be known as Kim Il-sung. Though his father was reportedly killed by communists, Kim would go on to join the Chinese Communist Party, then operating under the Comintern, effectively controlled by the Soviet Union—marking the beginning of what North Korea would call his "anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle."

Kim Il-sung's name first gained prominence when he helped a Chinese commander escape from a Japanese ambush.[35] But his real public emergence came during the 1937 Bocheonbo battle, in which Korean guerrillas attacked Japanese police outposts and administrative offices in present-day North Korea. His moment of fame, however, was short-lived. Targeted during the so-called "Minsaengdan Incident" (민생단 사건) purges in Manchuria, he narrowly escaped execution and fled to the Soviet Far East.[36]

In his memoirs, Kim claimed this experience led him to embrace a distinct "Korean-style" communism rooted in nationalism. His years in exile were marked by hardship, but in the USSR he became a Soviet military officer. He returned to Korea in 1945 as a Soviet captain, a rank that gave him credibility in the newly liberated North. Compared to southern communist leader Pak Hon-yong or northern nationalist Cho Man-sik, Kim was relatively unknown—ironically making him more appealing to Moscow, which sought a controllable figurehead.

Kim quickly absorbed the minor Kapsan faction, then aligned with the Soviet-Koreans repatriated from Central Asia. Although ideological groupings—the Manchurian (Manchu) faction, Soviet faction, Yan'an faction, and domestic faction—vied for influence, politics remained relatively stable until after the Korean War began.

The true struggle for power exploded after the 1953 armistice. Kim Il-sung accused Pak Hon-yong—who had pushed for southern uprisings to coincide with the invasion—of being a CIA agent and executed him. Others, including military commander Mu Chong and Soviet Korean Heo Ga were purged for military failures. But Kim's rivals were not yet vanquished. In 1956, amid the global communist crisis triggered by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, factions within the Workers' Party sought to remove Kim in what became the "August Faction Incident."[37]

Kim used divide-and-conquer tactics, playing the Yan'an and Soviet factions against each other. With superior intelligence networks, he branded dissenters "sectarianists" and purged them, reinforcing his determination to establish a one-man rule and hereditary succession.

By 1958, Kim Il-sung had eliminated almost all of his early rivals. Of the ten top party members in 1949, only two survived without being purged or killed by the South. With power centralized, Kim pushed for ideological

[35] Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
[36] Kim Il-sung, *With the Century*, 8 vols. (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1994–1998).
[37] Kim Jae-ung (김재웅), *예고된 쿠데타, 8월 종파사건* [*An Anticipated Coup d'État, the August Sectarian Incident*] (Pureun Yeoksa [푸른역사], 2024), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000213879169.

consolidation.[38] He introduced *Juche* as a national doctrine. Initially defined as the belief that humans are the masters of their own destiny, *Juche* evolved into a tool for suppressing dissent and justifying hereditary rule.

Amid growing ideological rifts between China and the USSR in the 1960s, Kim positioned North Korea as a "third way," securing aid from both sides while denouncing Soviet "revisionism" and Chinese "dogmatism." This dual diplomacy eventually gave way to a rigid isolationism framed as "self-sufficiency."

Juche was first mentioned publicly in Kim's 1955 speech criticizing Soviet-aligned cadres. By 1964, during a visit to Indonesia, Kim formally outlined *Juche's* four principles: independence in ideology, politics, economy, and defense.[39] The 1970 Workers' Party Congress enshrined *Juche* as the state ideology, and in 1972, it was written into the constitution.

Juche was more than theory—it was Kim Il-sung's political weapon. It rationalized purges, justified one-man rule, and laid the groundwork for Kim Jong-il's succession. In navigating post-war devastation, Cold War geopolitics, and internal party struggles, Kim Il-sung molded North Korea into one of the world's most repressive dynasties. The suffering it wrought—famines, mass surveillance, and systemic brutality—would be borne by the North Korean people for generations.

The Propaganda Genius: Kim Jong-il's Path to Power

July 8, 1994. The day remains unusually vivid even in my childhood memories—and likely in those of many Koreans who lived through the period. News broke that North Korea's founding leader, Kim Il-sung, had died—and I thought war was inevitable. Many others probably felt the same.

A dark cloud of conflict hung over the Korean Peninsula. On March 12, 1993, North Korea abruptly declared its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, triggering the crisis. Tensions escalated. At the March 19, 1994, working-level inter-Korean talks in Panmunjom, North Korean envoy Park Young-soo fiercely denounced U.N. Security Council sanctions, shouting:

"Seoul isn't far from here. If war breaks out, Seoul will become a sea of fire."

The statement pushed the peninsula to the brink. Domestic media gave the comment wall-to-wall coverage, and Seoul residents began panic-buying ramen and essentials (though such talks were normally confidential, the Blue House broke tradition and made this one—prompting debate over intent). In June, North Korea announced its exit from the International Atomic Energy Agency, peaking the first nuclear crisis.

On June 15, 1994, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter made an unexpected visit to Pyongyang and met with Kim Il-sung—a breakthrough moment no one had foreseen. Carter secured Kim Il-sung's agreement to a direct summit with South Korean President Kim Young-sam, laying the groundwork for the first inter-Korean summit. But just 17 days before that scheduled meeting—on July 8, 1994—Kim Il-sung died unexpectedly.

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[38] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[39] Seo Jae-jin (서재진), *주체사상의 형성과 변화에 대한 새로운 분석* [*A New Analysis of the Formation and Transformation of Juche Ideology*] (Korea Institute for National Unification [통일연구원], 2001), https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/583/1/0000596584.pdf.

His death sent shockwaves through North Korean society and abroad. War loomed, and observers speculated the regime might collapse. There was widespread pessimism that Kim Jong-il would fail to successfully inherit power. Newly released South Korean foreign ministry documents from 2025 show that, following Kim Il-sung's death, diplomats worldwide expected the North Korean leadership to be seriously destabilized. The Clinton administration's Stanley Russ, senior advisor at the NSC, told South Korean Ambassador Ban Ki-moon that—even if Kim Jong-il succeeded—he would "lack the charisma and legitimacy" of his father and would face significant challenges after a time, especially amid ongoing economic hardship. Russ also believed Kim Jong-il would maintain a hardline stance on the nuclear issue and wouldn't return to the negotiating table.

Russia, distancing itself from reform-minded relations with North Korea, also viewed the country's future bleakly. At the 1994 ASEAN Regional Forum, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev informed South Korean Foreign Minister Han Seung-soo that there was a real risk the regime might collapse. He noted Kim Jong Il lacked his father's heroic anti-Japanese credentials and ideological gravitas, and his limited military experience would make it difficult to manage political turmoil or regain control of the armed forces .

Yet Kim Jong-il used the ensuing three-year period of "will-based rule" to stabilize the regime and solidify succession. He leveraged his father's cult of personality and charisma to establish his foundation—exactly as planned. By formally taking the title of National Defense Commission Chairman in a September 1998 constitutional amendment, he became, in name and fact, North Korea's undisputed supreme leader.

Kim Il-sung rose to absolute power by navigating pressure from both the Soviet Union and China while eliminating his political rivals at home. He used the *Juche* ideology to consolidate his authority and took center stage himself, projecting charisma and strength. In contrast, his son Kim Jong Il's leadership style was markedly different. He maintained little contact with the public and rarely spoke in public.

While Kim Jong-il stayed largely behind the scenes, he gradually solidified his role as heir apparent by leveraging his father's influence. This strategy continued even after Kim Il-sung's death in 1994. To earn his father's trust and secure his succession, Kim Jong-il needed international achievements to his name, according to author Paul Fischer in *A Kim Jong-il Production*.

Born on February 16, 1942, in a Soviet military camp near Vladivostok, the child known as "Yura" would later become Kim Jong-il. He grew up during wartime, losing his younger brother Shura in 1948 and his mother, Kim Jong-suk, in 1949. After her death, Kim Il-sung remarried—first to Hong Young-sook, and later to Kim Song-ae, a former secretary during the Korean War. Kim Jong-il, deprived of a stable family, was raised alongside his sister Kim Kyong-hui by relatives like his uncle Kim Yong-ju and loyalists such as O Kuk-ryol. Despite being the son of the country's supreme leader, his childhood was neither warm nor secure. Growing up in the shadow of a powerful father and an absent mother, Kim Jong-il constantly sought to prove himself.

His path to succession was marked by a prolonged campaign for his father's recognition. At 18, Kim accompanied Kim Il-sung to a Soviet Communist Party Congress in Moscow, where he meticulously managed protocol and flattered his father. He asked officials pointed questions about his father's interests and issued

instructions to members of the delegation, gradually expanding his influence.[40] His propaganda skills eventually became a key reason why he stood out to Kim Il-sung.

Kim Jong-il was formally recognized as successor in 1980 when he was appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee and the Secretariat. Until then, speculation had surrounded Kim Il-sung's younger brother Kim Yong-ju, who had led the Organization and Guidance Department for a decade, as well as Kim Pyong-il, Kim Il-sung's son with Kim Song-ae, who had military experience. But only Kim Jong-il won Kim Il-sung's full favor. Hirai Hisashi, a former Kyodo News journalist who helped establish a Pyongyang bureau in Beijing, argued in his book[41] that the succession was less an easy inheritance and more a "seizure of power." According to Hirai, Kim Jong-il systematically sidelined rivals like Kim Yong-ju and Kim Pyong-il through what was known as the "removal of side branches" campaign, using propaganda and purges to eliminate them. His mastery of propaganda, he said, was the decisive factor in securing his rise.

A known cinephile, Kim Jong-il took the lead in creating "revolutionary films" by directly supervising all aspects of production—from screenwriting and directing to acting and cinematography.[42] Themes often centered around women devoted to the motherland. His obsession extended to the abduction of South Korean actress Choi Eun-hee and director Shin Sang-ok. The films drew international attention and helped him build credibility within the ruling party and state apparatus.

Kim began his official propaganda career in 1964 as a film arts instructor in the Workers' Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department, becoming section chief in 1967, deputy director in 1970, and full director in 1973. He later led within the Organization and Guidance Department and the Secretariat, focusing on party organization, propaganda, and agitation. The OGD and PAD are often described as the two wheels of North Korean political machinery. During this period, Kim increasingly embraced the notion—akin to Joseph Goebbels—that art and culture could be wielded as powerful tools of political indoctrination.

As part of his propaganda efforts, Kim Jong-il led the "April 15 Literary Production Unit," named after his father's birthday, to elevate Kim Il-sung's cult of personality. More than 12,000 monuments and statues were erected.[43] In 1968, Kim began distributing portraits of his father from the Mansudae Art Studio to state agencies; by 1969, every home and public institution in North Korea was required to display his portrait. This policy, known as the "portrait maintenance campaign," was enforced nationwide.

In 1970, Kim Jong-il introduced portrait badges featuring Kim Il-sung, which were distributed to party members and promoted as symbolic extensions of their bodies. From that point on, citizens were instructed to prioritize saving the portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il—alongside their Workers' Party membership cards—in the event of fires or natural disasters. North Korean media even promoted the story of a nine-year-old girl who allegedly died while trying to rescue the leaders' portraits from a burning building.

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[40] Hwang Jang-yeop (황장엽), *황장엽 회고록* [*Hwang Jang-yop Memoir*] (Sidae Jeongsin [시대정신], 2006), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001460610.

[41] Hirai Hisashi (히라이 하사시), *김정은 체제, 북한의 권력구조와 후계* [*The Kim Jong-un Regime: North Korea's Power Structure and Succession*], trans. Baek Gye-mun (백계문) and Lee Yong-bin (이용빈) (Hanul Academy [한울아카데미], 2012), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000000684332.

[42] Han Sang-eon, "김정일의 『영화예술론』과 북한영화" ["Kim Jong-il's 'On the Art of the Cinema' and North Korean Cinema"], *근대서지* (Geundae-seoji) 26 (2022): 717–746, https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART002910830.

[43] Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2012).

Kim Jong-il's cultural campaign reached its peak in the 1970s with the creation of the "five revolutionary operas" and "five revolutionary dramas," which continue to be performed today. Through these works, he elevated his father to godlike status and positioned himself as the rightful heir. Until his succession was fully secured, Kim intensified these propaganda efforts, solidifying his grip on power through ideological control.

This glorification campaign was not only about loyalty, but also a calculated strategy to eliminate rivals. If Kim Il-sung was to be seen as a deity, then the only rightful successor could be his son. After being named successor, Kim Jong-il developed ideological theories like the "Theory of the Revolutionary Leader" and the "Theory of the Socio-Political Organism," positioning himself as the interpreter of *Juche* ideology. He monopolized *Juche* as a political tool, adapting it to reinforce his own authority. Though Kim Il-sung initially resisted the theory, he ultimately embraced it upon seeing its effectiveness and accepted Kim Jong-il as successor.[44]

Kim Jong-il used this ideological dominance to eliminate opposition and reinterpret his father's will. He also employed manipulative tactics to weaken rivals. To undermine Kim Il-sung's affection for his second wife, Kim Song-ae (mother of potential rival Kim Pyong-il), Kim Jong-il allegedly arranged for attractive young women to serve as his father's nurses.[45] He reported the misconduct of Kim Song-ae's brother, Kim Song-gap, directly to Kim Il-sung, leading to his downfall.[46]

Over time, Kim Jong-il reshaped the core leadership, removing loyalists to his father and promoting his own allies. The biggest obstacles—Kim Song-ae's faction and his uncle Kim Yong-ju—were gradually purged. He also produced operas glorifying the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle, currying favor with elite cadres who were either part of or descended from that generation. These efforts earned him critical support from powerful figures who viewed hereditary succession as a way to safeguard their status.

As Kim Jong-il began consolidating power, a personal cult around him emerged. From the early 1980s, North Korean media began claiming that Kim Jong-il was born on Mount Paektu on February 16, 1942—even though Soviet records show he was born a year earlier at a military camp in the Russian Far East. But as the saying goes, there cannot be two suns in the sky; tensions between father and son grew.

Despite being raised under Kim Il-sung's shadow, Kim Jong-il built his own power base. Loyalists aligned with him, and the father-son relationship entered a prolonged period of strain. Kim Il-sung acknowledged his son's growing role and gradually ceded power, but Kim Jong-il had already outpaced him. His next goal was control of the military.

Kim Il-sung was reluctant to relinquish military authority. Drawing from the Chinese model of Deng Xiaoping, he intended to maintain his influence through the armed forces. Kim Jong-il, meanwhile, amended the 1972 socialist constitution to establish the National Defense Commission and became its first vice chairman, giving him a direct role in military affairs. In a symbolic move to further sideline his father, he elevated Kim Il-sung

[44] Hwang, *황장엽 회고록*.
[45] Hwang, *황장엽 회고록*.
[46] Ri Sotetsu (리 소테츠), *김정은 체제 왜 붕괴되지 않는가* [*Why Does the Kim Jong-un Regime Not Collapse?*], trans. Lee Dong-joo (이동주) (Redwood [레드우드], 2017), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001905254.

to the ceremonial post of state president, removing him from the premiership. Though framed as a respectful gesture, it effectively reduced Kim Il-sung to a symbolic figure.[47]

By the 1990s, Kim Jong-il was the de facto ruler. Communications and decisions ran through him, leaving Kim Il-sung politically isolated.[48] Seeking to reassert influence, Kim Il-sung turned to diplomacy. In 1994, during Jimmy Carter's visit, Kim Il-sung expressed support for an inter-Korean summit. The move reportedly alarmed Kim Jong-il, who quickly countered with a policy prioritizing socialism over unification. Kim Il-sung's death shortly afterward closed the door on what could have been a historic breakthrough.

Signs of a strained relationship between father and son became more evident after Kim Il-sung's death. According to South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Seoul received intelligence via embassies in countries with diplomatic missions in Pyongyang suggesting that Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il had clashed over key issues like inter-Korean talks. A Bulgarian analyst speculated that Kim Il-sung suffered a fatal heart attack in his sleep following a heated argument with his son. Others noted that the 82-year-old Kim Il-sung had been under immense stress from nuclear negotiations and the pending summit, which may have contributed to his death. A Russian diplomat even floated the possibility that forces opposed to reconciliation with South Korea played a role.

Kim Il-sung's passing did not mark the end of power struggles. Kim Jong-il faced mounting criticism as the first ruler to inherit leadership in a socialist state. He also navigated the collapse of the socialist bloc and the *Arduous March* famine. Early in his rule, he eliminated potential dissidents, including those involved in two alleged coup plots: the 1992 Frunze Military Academy conspiracy and the 1995 Sixth Army Corps incident. Though neither succeeded, Kim Jong-il responded by reorganizing the country's internal security forces. He consolidated border guards, coastal and railway units, and elements of the Ministry of Social Security under the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, centralizing military control. Surveillance of elites intensified, paving the way for his *songun* policy.

A particularly brutal consolidation campaign was the "Simhwajo Incident" (심화조 사건) between 1997 and 2000. The Ministry of People's Security created a special investigative unit, Simhwajo, which purged an estimated 25,000 citizens accused of espionage. The crackdown began in Pyongyang's Yongseong District after a civilian report and expanded nationwide. Kim Jong-il used the campaign to eliminate internal threats, including elite officials such as Agriculture Secretary Seo Gwan-hee, Party Secretary Moon Sung-sul, and Pyongyang Party Chief Seo Yoon-suk.

A Gambler With Nukes: Kim Jong-un's Bold Takeover

"The Nuclear Button Is On My Table."

At the height of the 2017 North Korean nuclear crisis, Kim Jong-un issued this stark warning to the United States. President Donald Trump swiftly replied, "My nuclear button is bigger and more powerful—and it works," intensifying the confrontation. U.S. media warned such rhetoric could spark an "accidental war." In retrospect, their relationship began amid intense provocation—yet, surprisingly, both learned to exploit the

[47] Thae Yong-ho, *Passcode to the Third Floor: An Insider's Account of Life Among North Korea's Political Elite*, trans. Robert Lauler (New York: Columbia University Press, April 2024).

[48] Hwang, *황장엽 회고록*.

dynamic. Through ups and downs, they met in person three times and exchanged some 27 complimentary letters.

Kim proved himself a gambler on par with Trump. He ruthlessly purged his uncle Jang Song-thaek, detonated four nuclear bombs to heighten global alarm, then swiftly engaged in nuclear negotiations with South Korea and the U.S. He even provided material and manpower to Russia during its war in Ukraine, seeking breakthrough in international sanctions. Although his gamble with America's nuclear talks didn't pay off as hoped, Kim Jong-un's leadership earned a reputation for audacity—at times veering into recklessness—far removed from his father's caution.

How did Kim develop this risk-taking persona? Having outmaneuvered his older brothers, he may have become more daring. Unlike in traditional Confucian succession, where the eldest son inherits, Kim Jong-un was neither firstborn nor initially recognized as heir. His older brothers—half-brother Kim Jong-nam and brother Kim Jong-chul—stood ahead of him. Bypassing elder siblings risks instability; early on, many analysts identified Kim Jong-nam as the likely successor, a view reinforced by defector accounts.

One witness, Yi Han-yong[49]—his cousin—reported that Kim Jong-il once told Kim Jong-nam at a Party gathering in 1979, "Jong-nam, when you grow up, this will be your place," suggesting a promise of leadership. Hwang Jang-yop also noted[50] that in 2008 China was monitoring Jong-nam and that he had strong backing from Jang Song-thaek—a primary contender for succession. Charismatic and popular with segments of the military, Jong-nam was widely regarded as heir apparent.

However, during his tours of provincial North Korea, Jong-nam became outspoken in advocating reform and openness. Alarmed by his proposals, Kim Jong-il began distancing himself.[51] Preference for another woman, Ko Yong-hui—Jong-un's mother—shifted familial loyalty. Jong-chul, though regarded affectionately, was described by Kim Jong-il as "too feminine," disqualifying him from succession. In contrast, Kim Jong-un displayed ambition and force of character that impressed his father.

Early signs came in 2009: Yonhap News reported on January 15 that Kim Jong-un had been designated successor. By September, he was promoted to four-star general despite no military experience, and in September 2010, elected vice chairman of the Central Military Commission—moves driven by Kim Jong-il's urgency after a stroke.

Initially, core supporters included Jang Song-thaek, Ri Yong-ho, and Choe Ryong-hae. Only Choe remained after Jong-un's takeover; Jang and Ri were purged, as were high-ranking figures like Kim Ki-nam and others. Kim Jong-un acted swiftly against suspected disloyal elites—attack as a preemptive defense. In December 2013, he publicly purged his uncle Jang, quashing any talk of a regency. The ruthless dictator had arrived.

Over 2014–2015, he continued calculated purges. Contrary to global expectations, the Swiss-educated heir showed no appetite for political reform; he chose stability. Despite warnings of potential internal unrest

[49] Lee Han-young (이한영), *김정일 로열 패밀리* [*Kim Jong-il's Royal Family*] (Sidae Jeongsin [시대정신], 2004), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001460596 (accessed September 18, 2025).

[50] Hwang, *황장엽 회고록*.

[51] Yōji Gomi, *My Father, Kim Jong-il, and I: North Korea's Exiled Son, Kim Jong-nam Speaks Out* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2012).

following Jang's removal, Kim focused on consolidating power and maintain order during North Korea's growing isolation.

Chapter 3 — Tragedies of the Would-Be Rulers

Kim Yo-jong: North Korea's Second-in-Command?

One of the most frequently asked questions whenever speculation arises over Kim Ju-ae as North Korea's potential successor is this: Why not Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's powerful younger sister? Some experts argue that in the event of Kim Jong-un's sudden death or serious illness, Kim Yo-jong would likely serve as a temporary regent,[52] guiding the transition until Kim Ju-ae comes of age. Indeed, under Kim Jong-un's rule, Kim Yo-jong has emerged as one of the regime's most visible and influential figures, often described as the de facto No. 2 in the leadership hierarchy.

Her rise became particularly notable after the execution of Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong-un's uncle. Analysts suggest that the Jang–Kim Kyong-hui couple may have opposed Kim Yo-jong's rise to power. Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Jong-un's aunt and Jang's wife, likely harbored reservations about a woman taking center stage, having personally experienced the brutal power struggles among women during Kim Il-sung's rule—especially the tension between his wife and his second wife, Kim Song-ae. Some reports suggest she may have deliberately kept her niece away from the political spotlight, a stance shaped by her own sidelined experience during the Kim Jong-il era.

After Jang's fall, Kim Yo-jong positioned herself close to her brother, steadily gaining prominence. She served as a key spokesperson on inter-Korean and U.S. relations, issuing statements in Kim Jong-un's name. Her symbolic presence peaked when she visited South Korea as a special envoy for the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics and later accompanied her brother to summits with the United States and South Korea. Memorable moments include handing a pen to Kim Jong-un for signing a joint declaration at the inter-Korean summit and holding an ashtray for him during a train stop en route to the Hanoi summit.

During Kim Jong-un's lonely student years in Switzerland, it was Kim Yo-jong—more than his elder brother Kim Jong-chol—who remained emotionally close. Although Kim Jong-chol also studied abroad, their timelines only overlapped for two years, from 1996 to 1998.

When rumors about Kim Jong-un's health spread globally in 2020, many North Korea experts speculated that Kim Yo-jong had become the de facto leader, eclipsing other male relatives such as Kim Jong-chol and Kim Pyong-il. Her rising stature was underscored by international attention; Professor Lee Sung-yoon published a book titled *The Sister: North Korea's Kim Yo-jong, the Most Dangerous Woman in the World*, sparking strong reactions in the United States.

[52] Bruce Klingner, interview by Jaewoo Park, 2024; Michael Madden, interview by Jaewoo Park, 2025.

Still, dynastic succession in authoritarian regimes rarely favors sisters or spouses. Within North Korea, ideological doctrines like the "theory of revolutionary succession" and "generational transfer" argue[53] that the heir must come from the next generation. Kim Yo-jong, being of the same generation as Kim Jong-un, doesn't fit this mold. Experts who consider her a 'side branch' of the lineage argue that Kim Ju-ae, a member of the next generation, better aligns with the logic of dynastic continuity from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un.

Ryu Hyun-woo, the former North Korean deputy ambassador to Kuwait who defected and appeared in the media, once said[54] he had met Kim Yo-jong personally and had heard much about her from his father-in-law, Jeon Il-chun—Kim Jong-un's former financial assistant. According to Ryu, Kim Yo-jong draws attention because she's a blood relative, not because she is a true No. 2 figure. North Korea's political culture does not allow for second-in-command positions, and historically, those perceived as such met grim fates. However, Ryu acknowledged that Kim Yo-jong is Kim Jong-un's primary spokesperson: "Among siblings, only one can perfectly convey the leader's will. Her voice is essentially his."

Some analysts believe Kim Ju-ae's sudden public appearances are part of a larger strategy to balance or rein in Kim Yo-jong's growing clout. North Korea's leadership has a history of keeping key aides in check—regardless of their loyalty—through "revolutionary reeducation" in remote mines or rural collectives. Pak Tae-song, for instance, rose rapidly under Kim Jong-un, only to vanish from the public eye in 2021 amid demotion rumors. Yet by 2022, he returned to central leadership, later becoming premier and a standing member of the Politburo.

While North Korea's leader has reshuffled military stars to maintain control, handling Kim Yo-jong—who is both family and Paektu bloodline—requires more subtle tactics. Rather than a public fall from grace, her influence may be diluted through symbolic gestures such as elevating Kim Ju-ae.

Ko Young-hwan, a former North Korean diplomat and defector, argued[55] that a power struggle may be brewing between Kim Ju-ae, Kim Yo-jong, and Kim Jong-un's wife, Ri Sol-ju. According to Ko, Kim Yo-jong's prominence waned after Kim Ju-ae's debut, creating potential friction. While Kim Yo-jong held various key posts and remained Kim Jong-un's closest confidante, Ri Sol-ju reportedly saw her sister-in-law's visibility as a threat—adding a familial layer to the political tension.

Such dynamics have led observers to liken the Kim family saga to *Game of Thrones*, or even to Korea's own historical royal struggles, such as the bloody succession battles during the era of Yi Bang-won, a prince of the early Joseon dynasty who later became King Taejong. Yi famously orchestrated the deaths of his political rivals—including his own brothers—in a brutal power struggle to secure the throne in the late 14th century. Professor Ian Robertson, a psychologist, has argued[56] that dictators seek to create dynasties to deify themselves. As divine figures, they elevate family members to semi-divine status, inevitably breeding internal conflict. In

[53] Youngjin Park and Donghwi Park, "A Critical Study on the Possibility of Succession of Female under the Kim Jong-un Regime in North Korea," *Korean Journal of Political Science* (대한정치학회보), vol. 31, no. 3 (2023): 97–120, https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART002990574.
[54] RFA, "Ryu Hyun-woo's Black North Korea: The Untold Story of Kim Yo-jong Is She Really North Korea's No. 2?" *Radio Free Asia*, May 5, 2024, https://www.rfa.org/korean/weekly_program/b958d604c6b0c758-be14b7995317c2a4/north-korea-black-box-secret-story-spokesperson-02192025090949.html.
[55] Tom O'Connor, "North Korea Power Struggle Seen Among Kim Jong-un's Sister, Wife & Child," *Newsweek*, March 21, 2023, https://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-power-struggle-seen-among-kim-jong-uns-sister-wife-child-1788350.
[56] Ian Robertson, interview by Jaewoo Park, virtual, March 2024.

Kim Jong-un's case, whether his daughter will inherit the throne or his sister or wife will gain political ground, the potential for intra-family tension remains high.

Succession battles within the Paektu bloodline are not new. The symbolic authority of the Kim bloodline is tied directly to regime legitimacy. Kim Jong-il, after securing high party posts in the 1970s, sidelined his uncle Kim Yong-ju, once seen as a rival. He capitalized on an ideological clash between Kim Yong-ju and ideologue Hwang Jang-yop to strengthen his own standing.[57] Likewise, Kim Song-ae, Kim Il-sung's second wife, tried but failed to place her own son Kim Pyong-il on the throne. Kim Jong-un himself allegedly had his half-brother Kim Jong-nam assassinated in Malaysia in 2017, viewing him as a lingering threat.

If Kim Ju-ae is now being groomed for succession, Kim Yo-jong—another woman of Paektu lineage—stands to lose the most. When speculation over Kim Ju-ae peaked, North Korea reintroduced her to the public within 80 days at an official event. Though she was given less ceremonial treatment compared to earlier appearances, South Korean media captured footage of Kim Yo-jong respectfully attending to her niece, a moment many saw as symbolic.

At a 2025 New Year's event, Kim Yo-jong appeared with two children, presumed to be her own. While this was a rare glimpse into her personal life, she remained in the background, far from the central stage occupied by Kim Ju-ae—a move that reinforced Ju-ae's rising prominence.

Some analysts believe Kim Yo-jong herself may have helped introduce Kim Ju-ae to the political scene. Yet, given North Korea's long history of internal power struggles and purges, it would be naive to rule out the possibility of a brewing rivalry.

Kim Jong-nam: The Heir Who Fell From Grace

Was there ever a viable alternative to the leadership of North Korea? And could one emerge in the future? The possibility seems remote. As previously noted, the principle of hereditary succession through the direct Paektu bloodline remains firmly intact. Meanwhile, the fate of other potential contenders has consistently been tragic.

On May 1, 2001, a man accompanied by two women and a young boy was detained at Tokyo's Narita International Airport. During questioning, the man identified himself as the son of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and said he was planning to visit Tokyo Disneyland. He was Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-il's eldest son. Five years later, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe confirmed that the man in question was indeed Kim Jong-nam.

Traveling under the alias "Pang Xiong" (Chinese for "Fat Bear"), Kim Jong-nam attempted to enter Japan using a forged Dominican Republic passport. Authorities became suspicious when he failed to speak Spanish and did not resemble a Latin American national. The incident exposed the use of a fake passport to smuggle into Japan and resulted in global embarrassment for the Kim family. Adding to the spectacle, Japanese media broadcast footage of his young son, Kim Geum-sol, holding his mother Shin Jong-hui's hand as they walked through the airport.

[57] Hwang, *황장엽 회고록*.

While Kim Jong-nam was publicly humiliated, he was not alone in his actions. Reports later emerged that Kim Jong-un also visited Tokyo Disneyland using a fake passport. Likewise, Jang Song-thaek was once detained while trying to visit his daughter in Norway using forged travel documents. Though Kim Jong-nam had been known through the testimony of his cousin Yi Han-yeong, this event marked the first time the public saw the supposed heir to the regime. His haggard appearance, coupled with the swift deportation to Beijing three days later, symbolized a significant fall from grace.

The Disneyland scandal is often cited as the turning point when Kim Jong-il lost faith in his eldest son. U.S. outlet *Foreign Policy* suggested the incident led to Kim Jong-nam's downfall, and Japan's Kyodo News reached a similar conclusion. But such interpretations may be oversimplified. Many insiders believed Kim Jong-nam's exclusion from the succession race was inevitable. This event simply sealed his fate.

Having experienced life abroad, Kim Jong-nam reportedly clashed with his father over reform and opening.[58] Raised overseas, he had a worldview shaped by exposure to freedom and capitalism—ideals incompatible with the legacy his father sought to uphold. While both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-nam lost their mothers early and felt isolated in a household filled with other women, their coping mechanisms differed: one pursued power, the other, freedom.

Among those with the most in-depth understanding of Kim Jong-nam was Yōji Gomi, a *Tokyo Shimbun* journalist who met him at Beijing airport and exchanged over 150 emails with him, conducting two in-person interviews. On the seventh anniversary of Kim Jong-nam's death, Gomi shared[59] his perspective on the man once seen as North Korea's heir.

Educated in Moscow and Geneva, and later living in Hong Kong and Macau, Kim Jong-nam developed a free-spirited personality. Gomi described him as a "lone wolf." His mother, Sung Hye-rim, suffered from depression and nervous breakdowns following rumors that she seduced Kim Jong-il in an extramarital affair. She was later treated in Moscow, leaving Kim Jong-nam to be raised by his grandmother and aunts, under surveillance in restricted compounds.[60] This early loneliness possibly led to his open demeanor with strangers in adulthood.

From 1994 to 2001, Kim Jong-nam was considered a likely successor. Internally, signs pointed to his grooming: when he was ten, Kim Jong-il brought him into his office and said, "This will be your seat one day."[61] He was also referred to as "General" by close associates. The intent to position him as the heir seemed clear.

But his long absence from Pyongyang in the mid-1990s left him without a support base inside North Korea. Unlike Kim Jong-un, whose mother Ko Yong-hui remained by Kim Jong-il's side and built power for her son, Kim Jong-nam lacked a strong maternal ally. Sung Hye-rim, desperate to gain recognition for her son, once pleaded with Kim Il-sung to meet him. Kim Jong-il refused,[62] citing poor timing and fearing his father's disapproval. Sung Hye-rim reacted with frustration and rage, and the situation spiraled to the point where Kim Jong-il reportedly drew a gun on her. Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Jong-il's sister, eventually stepped in and demanded

[58] Yōji Gomi, *My Father, Kim Jong-il, and I: North Korea's Exiled Son, Kim Jong-nam Speaks Out* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2012).
[59] Yōji Gomi, interview by Jaewoo Park, in person, February 2024.
[60] Sung Hae-rang, *Wisteria House* (Korean edition; Seoul: Zeitgeist, 2000).
[61] Lee, *김정일 로열 패밀리*.
[62] Ri Sotetsu (리 소테츠), *김정은 체제 왜 붕괴되지 않는가* [*Why Does the Kim Jong-un Regime Not Collapse?*], trans. Lee Dong-joo (Redwood [레드우드], 2017), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001905254.

Sung leave the residence so she could raise Kim Jong-nam herself. Sung's health deteriorated rapidly thereafter.[63]

Kim Jong-nam's protective circle eroded further with the defection of his cousin Yi Il-nam (Yi Han-yeong) to South Korea in 1982, his aunt Sung Hye-rang's defection to the U.S. in 1996, and finally his mother's death after years of illness. As his support vanished, so too did his chances.

Rumors later surfaced that the 2001 airport incident was orchestrated by Ko Yong-hui and her allies in the pro-Pyongyang Chongryon organization in Japan, who tipped off authorities to eliminate Kim Jong-nam as a successor. Reports[64] claimed agents were pre-positioned at the airport, and his arrest was signaled by an alert triggered as soon as he passed immigration. Questions were raised over the official explanation, including why his forged passport listed Korean as the native language—a common trait among many Asian-Latin American residents.

Even after Kim Jong-un's succession was secured, power struggles continued. In one email to Yōji Gomi,[65] Kim Jong-nam requested that an interview criticizing dynastic succession be published on the first anniversary of Kim Jong-un's rule. He also condemned the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, an act attributed to his younger brother. Though he publicly stated he harbored no ill will and wished to help his sibling, his statements and actions suggested otherwise.

Multiple assassination attempts reportedly occurred in China and Austria. In April 2009, North Korea's State Security Department raided "Uamgak" (우암각), a location in central Pyongyang where Kim Jong-nam frequently hosted gatherings. Attendees were arrested and interrogated, likely as part of Kim Jong-un's purge. Enraged, Kim Jong-nam fled to Singapore and avoided returning to Pyongyang.[66]

Kim Jong-nam remained a sensitive figure. As a member of the Paektu bloodline, his mere existence symbolized an alternative to Kim Jong-un's legitimacy—if not in practice, at least in principle.

In 2017, he was assassinated at Kuala Lumpur International Airport with VX nerve agent. The attack's origin remains unclear—whether internal, external, or both—but it occurred amid deep instability within North Korea's power structure. The powerful State Security Department had eclipsed the once-dominant Organization and Guidance Department, which may have orchestrated the assassination as a show of loyalty.[67]

While Kim Jong-nam may not have posed a direct threat to Kim Jong-un's power, his existence was inconvenient—an enduring symbol of another possible branch of the Paektu bloodline. His assassination was not merely an act of personal elimination but a strategic message within North Korea's rigid hierarchy: loyalty is absolute, and legitimacy flows only through one chosen line.

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[63] Ri, *김정은 체제 왜 붕괴되지 않는가*.
[64] Lee Young-i (이영이), "김정남에 얽힌 의문점들" ["The Mysteries Surrounding Kim Jong-nam"], *Dong-A Ilbo* [동아일보], September 20, 2009, https://www.donga.com/news/article/all/20010504/7685150/1.
[65] Yōji Gomi, *My Father, Kim Jong-il, and I: North Korea's Exiled Son, Kim Jong-nam Speaks Out* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2012).
[66] Lee Young-jong, *Successor Kim Jong-Un* (Tokyo: Modern Book Society, 2009).
[67] Hong Min, *Motivation Behind Kim Jong-Nam's Assassination and the Hidden Side of Kim Jong-un's Reign of Terror*, KINU Occasional Paper 17-07 (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2017), [PDF file], https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/8419/1/0001478435.pdf.

Jang Song-thaek: The Uncle Turned Rival

Jang Song-thaek, often portrayed as a central figure in North Korean power politics and a casualty of Kim Jong-un's rise, was once a tall and handsome youth. Though not academically gifted, he was intelligent and sociable—traits that made him popular among peers. Had he not met Kim Kyong-hui at university, Jang might have become a successful entrepreneur in North Korea, as he came from a decent family background and had a good head for numbers.

According to North Korean defector Noh Hee-chang[68]—whose uncle was a childhood friend of Jang—Jang could have risen to become the CEO of a multinational corporation had he been born outside North Korea. Noh became close to Jang through this family connection, which also enabled him to work in the Middle East and Russia as an official in the External Construction Guidance Bureau of the Workers' Party.

But Jang's life changed dramatically when he married Kim Kyong-hui, daughter of Kim Il-sung and sister of Kim Jong-il. The marriage elevated him to the status of royal family—a title that conferred immense privilege but also grave risk.[69] In North Korea's absolute monarchy, no one outside the supreme leader is permitted to hold real power. Even royal family members enjoy limited privileges under constant surveillance. Ra Jong-yil, a former deputy director of South Korea's National Intelligence Service, described Jang as a man who navigated dangerously between the royal Paektu bloodline and the general elite.

Jang was well-liked, enjoyed drinking and music, and had a notorious reputation for womanizing. He hosted lavish social gatherings—something typically reserved for Kim Jong-il—earning repeated reprimands and eventually a demotion. His personal behavior led to political exile. Nevertheless, Kim Jong-il, lacking trust in those around him, recalled Jang in 2006 and made him head of the newly created Administrative Department of the Workers' Party.

After Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in 2008 and began grooming Kim Jong-un as his successor, Jang was tapped as a key advisor and power broker. Upon Kim Jong-il's death, Jang—alongside his wife—became one of Kim Jong-un's official guardians and a member of the "Pallbearer 7." Until his execution in late 2013, Jang was widely considered North Korea's de facto No. 2. He reportedly held policy discussions with senior officials, influenced final decisions, and maintained close ties with Chinese elites, expressing openness to economic reform.

Some even speculated that Jang was acting as a regent behind the scenes, although his purge ultimately debunked such theories. North Korea's official charges against Jang in 2013 included showing disrespect toward Kim Jong-un, plotting treason, and moral depravity. But the real reason appears more political: Jang had become the greatest obstacle to consolidating Kim Jong-un's absolute authority.

Tensions between the two reportedly deepened over time. Analysts believe Jang's support for Kim Jong-nam, coupled with his close ties to Chinese officials and his reformist stance, were key factors. Noh Hee-chang claimed Jang once made favorable remarks about Kim Jong-nam, which circulated within elite circles. Journalist

[68] Noh Hee-chang, in-person interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.

[69] Ra Jong-il (라종일), *장성택의 길* [*Jang Song-thaek's Path*] (Alma, February 3, 2016), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001867695.

Yōji Gomi also quoted Kim Jong-nam as saying he had a small faction of supporters within the party. It was well known that the Jang-Kim couple provided financial support for Kim Jong-nam while he lived in Macau.

Jang was a vocal proponent of Chinese-style reform and developed deep ties with Chinese officials. In 2012, shortly before his downfall, he led a 50-member delegation to China for the Third Hwanggumpyong and Rason Joint Development Talks. The warm reception he received reportedly made Kim Jong-un uncomfortable.

According to Ri Jeong-ho,[70] a former senior official from Office 39—Kim Jong-un's personal financial nerve center—Jang's purge dashed hopes for reform under Kim Jong-un. Ri defected with his family shortly after.

Internally, Kim Jong-un tasked Jang with reducing the overgrown power of the military and the Ministry of State Security—agencies bloated under his father's *songun* policy. Jang's Administrative Department was quietly implementing this strategy. At the same time, Kim sought to diminish the clout of the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), which held sweeping control over party and military appointments.

Ironically, while attempting to reduce the influence of others, Jang became a target himself. As he gained control over critical ministries—including the state security and public safety organs—Jang's own growing power drew scrutiny from the OGD. Before he could solidify his position, he was politically outmaneuvered.

The OGD accused Jang of trying to usurp its role as the party's control tower. Jang, believing he had Kim Jong-un's backing, acted boldly—launching large-scale business operations, some through Victory Joint Venture Company, previously under the Ministry of People's Armed Forces. He ignored North Korea's rigid class system, appointing individuals based on merit or utility, even if they had criminal backgrounds. These actions gave the OGD enough justification to act against him.

Jang's associates flaunted their power and created more problems. The OGD reported to Kim Jong-un that, for the "Monolithic Leadership System" to be established, these personnel issues must be corrected. Given Kim's own insecurities—he was born to a mother of Chongryon (pro-Pyongyang Japanese-Korean) background and considered an illegitimate son—he was receptive to these concerns. Ultimately, the OGD reclaimed its position as the regime's nerve center.

Jang's Administrative Department was disbanded, military-run trading businesses resumed operations, and Jang was demoted to Chairman of the State Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission—only a symbolic role. In December 2013, during a Politburo expanded meeting, he was arrested in front of the elite.

One of the last images of Jang shows him handcuffed, head bowed, and escorted by state security agents. On December 12, 2013, North Korea announced that Jang had been sentenced to death in a special military tribunal and executed immediately. During a later summit, Donald Trump claimed Kim Jong-un had Jang's decapitated body displayed to senior officials as a warning.[71] Yet, Noh Hee-chang, still emotionally conflicted, maintains that no video or definitive evidence of Jang's execution has ever surfaced—and he continues to believe that Jang may still be alive.

[70] Ri Jeong-ho, in-person interview by Jaewoo Park, March 2024.
[71] Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

Other Potential Claimants From the Paektu Line

Kim Jong-chul, the older brother of Kim Jong-un, remains distant from frontline politics but is believed to maintain close personal ties with both Kim Jong-un and Kim Yo-jong. As the eldest son of Kim Jong-il, Jong-chul arguably possesses strong dynastic legitimacy. In a crisis scenario, he could be considered a less politically burdensome alternative. It is also believed that Kim Jong-chul has children who may be older than Kim Ju-ae.

According to former South Korean lawmaker Thae Yong-ho,[72] Kim Jong-chul visited the UK in 2006 to attend an Eric Clapton concert. While shopping with embassy staff, he reportedly purchased children's clothing, saying, "If I come all the way to London and don't buy clothes for my kids, I'll look like a bad father." This was one of the rare instances where he acknowledged having children.

Nevertheless, questions persist about whether Kim Jong-chul has either the ambition or the capacity to wield power. He is widely known to have little interest in politics and is passionate only about music, particularly Eric Clapton. In 2016, South Korea's National Intelligence Service reported that Jong-chul lived in isolation from the power structure. He had allegedly sent a letter to Kim Jong-un from the Masikryong Ski Resort, thanking him for the opportunity to visit and saying, "Thanks to your grace, I forgot I even had a cold. I'll repay the great love you've shown to someone as useless as me."

Though Kim Jong-un appears to accommodate his brother's lifestyle, rumors persist that Jong-chul is kept under close surveillance and suffers from psychological distress. These developments underscore his increasing marginalization. There have also been unverified claims that he co-leads the "Bonghwa Group (봉화조)," an elite circle comprising children of top North Korean officials, in coordination with Kim Jong-un.[73]

In February 2024, a noteworthy development emerged: North Korea's academic journal *Historical Science* published an article praising Kim Jong-il's nuclear policy.[74] The article's author, listed only as "Kim Jong-chul" without title or affiliation, led analysts to believe it referred to Kim Jong-un's older brother. Experts interpreted this as an attempt by the regime to reintroduce Jong-chul in a limited role as a "family historian" to symbolically reinforce the legitimacy of the emerging fourth-generation dynastic succession centered on Kim Ju-ae.

Compared to Jong-chul, another potential candidate with some perceived stability is Kim Pyong-il, the younger brother of Kim Jong-il. A former lieutenant general in the Korean People's Army, Kim Pyong-il once held favorable standing among the military and delivered public speeches—unusual in a regime that emphasizes secrecy. He famously addressed military cadets in 1976 following the Panmunjom axe murder incident and voluntarily enlisted, receiving praise from Kim Il-sung. Kim Pyong-il also has children who could carry on the Paektu lineage.

However, his fall from grace began in 1979 when Kim Jong-il consolidated power. Pyong-il was sent abroad as ambassador to various Eastern European countries—widely interpreted as political exile. Over four decades in

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[72] Thae Yong-ho, *Passcode to the Third Floor: An Insider's Account of Life Among North Korea's Political Elite*, trans. Robert Lauler (New York: Columbia University Press, April 2024).

[73] Mildducks (밀덕스), "북한탐사3회북한탐사 3회북한탐사3회 북한 숨어있는 실세, 김정철을 파헤치다!!! / YTN2 밀덕스" ["North Korea Exploration Ep. 3: Uncovering Kim Jong-chol, the Hidden Power in North Korea!!! / YTN2 Mildducks"], YouTube, January 23, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cq5KW43B0C8.

[74] Kim Myung-sung (김명성), "샌드타임즈 [단독] 기타만 치던 왕자 김정철…김씨 가문 '서사 기록자'로 나서나" ["Sand Times [Exclusive] Kim Jong-chol, Once Known Only as the Guitar-playing Prince… Emerging as the 'Narrator of the Kim Family Saga'?"], *Sand Times*, April 4, 2025, https://www.sandtimes.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=656.

diplomatic postings effectively removed him from the North Korean power circle. With little independent political base and low visibility among the public, Kim Pyong-il is unlikely to emerge as a viable successor.

His long-term marginalization by the Kim family further complicates his prospects. Should he ever seek power, some believe he may harbor resentment and could pursue retribution, making him a risky option in the eyes of current elites.

Kim Jong-nam's children, particularly Kim Han-sol, are also occasionally mentioned as potential challengers. Han-sol has expressed liberal and critical views, including calling Kim Jong-il a "dictator" in a European interview and expressing sympathy for the suffering of North Korean citizens. After his father's assassination at Kuala Lumpur Airport, Han-sol fled to a third country with his mother and sister—a journey partially documented by the YouTube channel of the group Free Joseon (Cheollima Civil Defense). Rumors suggest he may now be living under CIA protection in the United States, though this remains unconfirmed. Very little is known about his younger half-brother, Kim Geum-sol, who is reportedly living in China under government protection.

Despite their dynastic credentials, neither Han-sol nor Geum-sol are seen as realistic candidates for leadership. Their connection to Kim Jong-un's enemies—particularly Jong-nam, whom Kim had executed—makes reconciliation unlikely. North Korea's internal politics are deeply allergic to dissent, and the people still prioritize bloodline, albeit within accepted bounds.

As long as North Korea is ruled by the Kim family, genuine reform and opening seem out of reach. The three generations of Kim leaders have used the state ideology of *Juche* to resist reform, preserving their grip on power. Those within the family who hinted at reform—such as Kim Jong-nam and Jang Song-thaek—were swiftly eliminated.

While Kim Jong-nam and Jang Song-thaek were beneficiaries of the regime's privileges, their actions represented alternative visions for the country. Jong-nam freely traveled to China, Southeast Asia, and Macau, and maintained contact with the outside world, notably through Japanese journalist Yōji Gomi. His cosmopolitan lifestyle and openness to reform were perceived as threats by Kim Jong-un. Jang Song-thaek, meanwhile, was a powerful advocate of Chinese-style economic reform and fostered close ties with Beijing. Some analysts believe his 2013 execution was not just about internal power struggles but was also intended to halt any movement toward reform. Both men were symbols—however flawed—of a possible path toward transformation. Their violent removal underscores the Kim regime's ironclad commitment to continuity over change, even at the cost of its own family members.

Chapter 4 — The 'Princess' of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

How Do Other Countries View Kim Ju-ae?

"This week, North Korea's leader announced a new law that no one else in the country can have the same name with 10-year-old daughter, Ju-ae. And this hit me personally because I am (laughter) you are head of it…. I am pretty Jew-ayes. But just imagine how much it would sucks for all other Jew-ayes out there. You know they gotta change their name now, you gotta switch your name on the internet bills, cable accounts, and newspaper subscriptions—I mean, they don't have those there in North Korea, but still…"

So joked comedian Sarah Silverman on *The Daily Show*, one of the most popular comedy programs in the United States, during a segment aired in February 2023. Citing a report from Radio Free Asia (RFA),[75] she mocked North Korea's decision to order citizens with the same name as Kim Ju-ae to legally change it. The humor hinged on the phonetic similarity between "Ju-ae" and "Jew-aye" in English.

South Korea's own sketch comedy show, *SNL Korea*, also took aim at the Kim family. Comedian Lee Soo-ji appeared dressed as Kim Ju-ae, delivering lines while laughing in a deliberately exaggerated way: "Haek-haek-haek" (핵 핵 핵), mimicking both a child's giggle and the Korean word for "nuclear." These parodies underline how Kim Jong-un's daughter and the apparent fourth-generation succession are seen not with awe, but with ridicule.

This satirical perspective isn't limited to the United States or South Korea. Across much of the Western world—including Japan, Europe, and even parts of China and Russia—the idea of a dynastic dictatorship in the 21st century draws both disbelief and scorn.

In Japan, North Korea once enjoyed considerable support among ethnic Koreans who had settled there during Japan's colonial rule. In 1955, pro-Pyongyang Korean residents established the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, or *Chongryon*. During the 1970s, while North Korea's economy still outpaced that of the South, Chongryon-affiliated schools flourished. But over time, the movement lost its influence due to North Korea's economic collapse, internal discrimination, and the naturalization of many members into South Korean or Japanese society.

Today, Chongryon schools continue to emphasize ethnic pride and reunification education but are not officially recognized as part of Japan's formal education system due to their pro-North alignment. Kim Jong-un's mother, Ko Yong-hui, was herself repatriated from Japan to North Korea through a Chongryon program in the 1960s, making Chongryon the only overseas Korean diaspora group with direct personal ties to the ruling family. Even so, reports suggest that within Chongryon circles today, the idea of a fourth-generation hereditary succession is causing unease.

Park Hyang-su, a former Chongryon member and now a human rights activist, said[76] that despite growing up in Chongryon-run schools and being the daughter of a former Chongryon bank branch manager, she has since become a vocal critic of the regime. She noted that Chongryon has remained silent on Kim Ju-ae's public appearances, likely because even sympathizers find the situation troubling. A current Chongryon official

[75] Son Hye-min, "'Change the Name Ju-Ae': North Korea Reportedly Forcing Citizens to Rename Their Children," *Radio Free Asia*, February 10, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks/namechange-02102023093014.html.
[76] Park Hyang-su, virtual interview by Jaewoo Park, January 2025.

confirmed that there have been no internal discussions about Ju-ae, suggesting widespread discomfort with the topic.

In China, ethnic Korean-Chinese communities—especially in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture—once looked up to North Korea. Through the 1960s and 1970s, they listened to North Korean broadcasts, sang Pyongyang's songs, and considered the North Korean an advanced socialist state.[77] That perception began to erode in the 1980s as China opened up economically while North Korea embraced dynastic succession, first to Kim Jong-il and then Kim Jong-un.

Today, many ethnic Koreans in China regard North Korea as a reclusive, irrational regime. Criticism of Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un has become common, even among older generations who once idolized them. Among Chinese, North Korea's ruling system is viewed as bizarre—more like a feudal dynasty than a modern state. On Chinese social media platforms such as Bilibili and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), images of Kim Ju-ae are often shared with hashtags like "North Korean Princess" (朝鲜公主), highlighting both fascination and irony.

Kim Ju-ae—or Kim Ju-ye?

There is a popular theory that Kim Jong-un personally named his daughter using a combination of syllables from his wife Ri Sol-ju's name (주·主 "ju") and the Chinese character for love (애·愛 "ae"). Yet to this day, North Korean state media has never confirmed her name, instead referring to her only as "beloved daughter" or "respected child."

Dr. Sung-yoon Lee, author of *The Sister* and former fellow at the Wilson Center, suggested[78] that Dennis Rodman—the American basketball star who first revealed the daughter's existence—may have misheard her name. Rodman may have misheard the phrase, when in fact it might be "Ju-eun 주은" ("Ju" (주) from Ri Sol-ju (리설주) and "eun" (은) from Kim Jong-un (김정은)). This naming pattern would mirror that of Kim Jong-il (김정일), whose name is believed to combine syllables from both of his parents: Kim Jung-sook (김정숙) and Kim Il-sung (김일성).

Furthermore, "Ju-ae" (주애) is considered an old-fashioned name in North Korea, and given that Kim Jong-il reportedly had a poor relationship with his stepmother Kim Sung-ae (김성애), it is unlikely that Kim Jong-un would choose a name that echoes hers. Some analysts also speculate that Rodman may have misheard a North Korean saying '저 애' (Jeo-ae), which simply means 'that child' in Korean, and interpreted it as a proper name, 'Ju-ae'.

While North Korean media has never confirmed the girl's name, several people who accompanied Rodman on his visits to Pyongyang told me that the girl's name was indeed "Ju-ae." Among those with Rodman were his manager Chris Volo, Columbia University professor Joseph Terwilliger, and Canadian businessman Michael

[77] Ri, 김정은 체제 왜 붕괴되지 않는가.
[78] Park Jae-u, "U.S. Expert: Kim Jong-un's Daughter's Name Is Not 'Ju-ae' but Possibly 'Ju-eun,'" *Radio Free Asia (Korean Service)*, September 15, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks/kimjuaejueun-09152023144234.html.

Spavor. Both Terwilliger and Spavor are fluent in Korean, and are believed to have heard the name directly before it was relayed in Rodman's media interviews. Yet Rodman himself no longer remembers the name.

Interestingly, some high-ranking North Korean defectors have offered a different version:[79] "Ju-ye." Ri Il-gyu, former political counselor at the North Korean Embassy in Cuba, and Thae Yong-ho, former North Korean diplomat in London, both claim that the name is not written with the character for love ('ae/애·愛'), which is rarely used in North Korean political culture. Instead, they argue, the name likely uses the characters for "lord" ('ju/주·主') and "brightness or wisdom" ('ye/예·悉'), conveying a message: "Be a wise ruler."

Such confusion is not new. When Kim Jong-un first emerged in public, even South Korean media mistakenly referred to him as "Kim Jong-woon" (김정운), based on early reporting from Japanese chef Kenji Fujimoto, a former member of Kim Jong-il's inner circle. For years, even Kim Jong-un's mother Ko Yong-hui (고용희) was misidentified as Ko Young-hee (고영희), until Japan's *Sankei Shimbun* corrected the record in 2012 using a photo of her tombstone. Later, her sister Ko Yong-suk, who defected to the United States, confirmed in a 2015 *Washington Post* interview that the correct Chinese characters in her name were "Yong-hui."

Despite the lingering uncertainty, this book will refer to her as Kim Ju-ae, as the name has gained widespread recognition in media and government circles.

As of this writing, Kim Ju-ae is believed to be around 13 years old. Her likely birth year is late 2012 or early 2013, aligning with Rodman's first visit and the year North Korea celebrated Kim Il-sung's 100th birthday. In North Korea, such symbolic dates matter: Kim Jong-il's official birth year was changed from 1941 to 1942 to align with Kim Il-sung's 30th birthday, and Kim Jong-un's birth year was adjusted to 1982 to align with the 70th anniversary.

The Lifestyle of a Princess

Though Ju-ae's face is now known around the world, little else is publicly confirmed. Still, based on what we know of Kim Jong-un's upbringing and that of his half-brother Kim Jong-nam, we can reasonably infer Ju-ae's lifestyle. According to South Korea's National Intelligence Service,[80] she was fed Aptamil—a premium German formula—as an infant. Kenji Fujimoto[81] said he was tasked with sourcing the best seafood from Tokyo's Tsukiji Market, mangoes and papayas from Thailand, and wine from Europe for the Kim family.

The Mansumugang Research Institute in North Korea, dedicated to health and longevity of the ruling Kim family, reportedly tailors luxury nutrition and medical care to each family member. Kim Ju-ae is likely receiving similar treatment, including rare delicacies and elite medical attention.

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[79] Yi Il-gyu, "Kim Jong-un's Daughter Is Not 'Ju-ae,' but I Think It's 'Ju-ye,'" *JoongAng Ilbo*, April 4, 2025, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25275334.
[80] *YTN*. "Ri Sol-ju's Luxury Coat Is a Favorite… Even for Babies, Luxury Formula." July 17, 2015, https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0101_201507171119170488.
[81] Kenji Fujimoto (후지모토 겐지), 김정일의 요리사 [Kim Jong-il's Chef], trans. Shin Hyun-ho (신현호) (Wolgan Chosun-sa, September 22, 2003), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001428457.

Recent state media images show her standing tall next to her father on beaches and at military sites, suggesting she is physically taller than her North Korean peers. Estimates based on her father's height (approximately 5.5ft (170 cm)) suggest she may already be near 5.2ft (160 cm), notably above the average height of 4.6ft (141 cm) for North Korean girls her age.

According to a joint 2021 report by UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank, 20% of North Korean children under age five suffered from stunted growth. But elite children like Ju-ae are an exception.

Eyewitness accounts and intelligence reports suggest she is homeschooled in Pyongyang and practices horseback riding and skiing. Like her father and uncle before her, she may live in one of North Korea's more than 70 exclusive guesthouses known as *chodaeso (초대소)*, which are essentially private luxury estates for the Kim family.

In Wonsan, the family seaside compound features equestrian grounds, shooting ranges, and massive yachts[82] with amenities like Olympic-sized pools and slides. During summer, she may enjoy these lavish facilities, much like Dennis Rodman and his entourage did during their visit.

Fashion is another area where Ju-ae seems to take after her mother. Ri Sol-ju, often described as North Korea's fashion icon, is known for her refined sense of style. State media photos show Ju-ae wearing Christian Dior, and even sheer outfits. During a May 14, 2024 ceremony in Pyongyang, Ju-ae appeared in a semi-transparent dress—a bold choice given North Korea's conservative dress codes. Afterward, RFA[83] reported that the North Korean authorities issued warnings labeling such styles as "anti-socialist," effectively banning them among ordinary citizens.

Despite living in privilege, Ju-ae is likely surrounded by security staff, caretakers, and military guards, creating a cloistered environment. Similar accounts describe Kim Jong-nam's isolated childhood. He was restricted from going out except to designated facilities such as Bonghwa Clinic.

According to psychologists, a child raised with such privilege and isolation may be at risk of developing narcissistic traits. Professor Frederick Coolidge of the University of Colorado explains[84] that while all children begin life with narcissistic tendencies, these are usually tempered through socialization. Without it, the belief in one's superiority may intensify. As a descendant of the Paektu bloodline—a term that confers almost divine status in North Korea—Ju-ae may internalize this sense of exceptionalism.

Evidence of this may already be emerging. On December 31, 2023, during a grand New Year's Eve concert at Pyongyang's May Day Stadium, Kim Jong-un received flower bouquets from children. But Ju-ae received hers from an adult woman, who bowed deeply while presenting it. Ju-ae accepted it passively, staring at the woman with detachment. While this doesn't prove she is narcissistic, it does reflect the environment in which she is being raised.

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[82] Noh Jeong-min (노정민), "[줌 인 북한] 김정은, 50m 이상 호화유람선 4대 보유 ['Zoom in North Korea: Kim Jong-un Owns Four Luxury Cruise Ships Over 50 Meters']," *Radio Free Asia* (RFA), September 25, 2022, https://www.rfa.org/korean/news_indepth/nk_nuclear_talks-09232022142946.html.

[83] Kim Ji-eun (김지은), "김주애 '시스루 의상' 현송월 '수탉머리' 주민엔 금지" ["Kim Ju-ae in 'See-through Outfit,' Hyon Song-wol in 'Rooster Hairstyle'—Styles Banned for Ordinary North Korean Citizens"], Radio Free Asia (자유아시아방송), August 14, 2024, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks/antisocialism-08142024100813.html.

[84] Frederick Coolidge, video interview by Jaewoo Park, January 2024.

Psychologists say that narcissism tends to manifest more strongly in boys than girls. But in a dynastic monarchy like North Korea, even daughters are not immune.

"Kim Jong-un had a short temper and little patience," recalled his aunt Ko Yong-suk in an interview with *The Washington Post*. "When his mother scolded him for playing too much and not studying enough, he wouldn't argue, but he'd protest by going on hunger strikes."

"He (Kim Jong-nam) was treated like a prince. No one used honorifics with him, not even me," wrote Yi Han-yong,[85] a defector who once lived inside the Kim family compound. "He was the uncontested king of the mansion. He often sulked and had a strong will. When he got angry, there was nothing anyone could do but wait it out."

Kim Ju-ae may be growing up in a similarly gilded cage—coddled, revered, and dangerously unchallenged.

What We Know about Kim Ju-ae

On October 10, 2010, during a massive military parade marking the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim Jong-il appeared gripping a railing, revealing to the world his ailing health. Throughout the parade, Kim Jong-un exhibited behaviors that set him apart from other officials. He clapped in the manner of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, and mimicked his father's salutes. Kim Jong-il frequently glanced at Kim Jong-un—not with the cold eyes of a supreme ruler, but rather with the concern of a father contemplating his son's uncertain future.

Thirteen years later, on February 8, 2023**,** at the military parade celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army, the atmosphere was entirely different. In footage and photos released by *Korean Central Television* (*KCTV*) and *KCNA*, Kim Jong-un and Kim Ju-ae exchanged warm and intimate gestures. One image even captured Ju-ae naturally touching her father's chest and cheek—unprecedented displays of affection between a North Korean leader and his child. While possibly staged, the interactions seemed genuine, highlighting a deeply affectionate familial bond under the protective eyes of both parents.

As previously noted, Ju-ae appears to receive the highest privileges. She has been seen wearing luxury items such as Dior jackets and fine furs, and enjoying extravagant meals. At a celebratory banquet following a visit to the Navy Command, a high-end Japanese salt shaker was seen placed in front of her—a striking exception given the general prohibition on Japanese products in North Korea.[86] But such restrictions rarely apply to the Paektu bloodline. This scene underlines the special material and emotional nurturing Ju-ae is receiving.

Analysis of her public appearances shows that Ju-ae sometimes disappears from the spotlight for over two months. After repeated public outings in designer clothes, reports from RFA indicated[87] growing resentment among ordinary North Koreans. Shortly afterward, she vanished from public view. Her activities ceased again

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[85] Lee Han-young (이한영), *김정일 로열 패밀리* [*Kim Jong-il's Royal Family*] (Sidae Jeongsin, February 25, 2004), https://product.kyobobook.co.kr/detail/S000001460596 (accessed September 18, 2025).
[86] Yi Young-jong, "[Exclusive] Ajinomoto 'Japanese' season salt placed on Kim Ju-ae's table… while residents face anti-Japan propaganda," *NewsPim*, September 1, 2023, https://www.newspim.com/news/view/20230901000043.
[87] Kim Ji-eun, "The First Daughter Has Grown Tall and North Koreans Are Watching," *Radio Free Asia*, April 30, 2025, https://www.rfa.org/english/korea/2025/04/30/korea-kim-daughter-growth.

amid media focus on her as a potential successor, or when critical national issues like Kim Jong-un's visit to Russia or satellite launches required public attention elsewhere. This suggests that her appearances are meticulously curated by the Propaganda and Agitation Department, and by Kim Jong-un and Ri Sol-ju, to manage her image.

Notably, after her initial appearance, subtle changes were made. For example, her second appearance featured more opulent fashion, indicating a shift in presentation.

Early in her public life, Ju-ae mainly accompanied her father on military inspections. Gradually, she began appearing at key Party events and developmental projects tied to North Korea's future—tourism zones and "Future Street" developments. Given that her debut coincided with the test of the Hwasong-17 ICBM, her appearances seem to signify not just military prowess, but a vision of the regime's future.

Observers now argue that Ju-ae is beginning to serve a symbolic role surpassing that of a mere daughter. Her half-up, neatly tied hair and mature outfits echo Ri Sol-ju's style. Some speculate that Ju-ae is already assuming partial "First Lady" functions.

This theory gains traction when considering Ri Sol-ju's reduced visibility. Since Ju-ae's rise, Ri has been nearly absent from public activities, possibly a strategic retreat to emphasize her daughter's presence. Ri Sol-ju hasn't vanished entirely—her reflections or background appearances have been spotted in state footage, hinting she is orchestrating Ju-ae's rise from behind the scenes.

This pattern recalls former president of South Korea Park Geun-hye's public emergence following the assassination of her mother, Yuk Young-soo. Park became a stand-in First Lady and later carried the symbolic legacy of her father, President Park Chung-hee. Ju-ae, likewise, is being groomed as a symbolic figure, potentially as heir.

Interestingly, while Ju-ae sometimes appears alone in official photos—even prioritized over Kim Jong-un—many of the images in video footage show awkward moments of her moving or displaying stiffness.

Being in the spotlight is new for her. Other children of the Paektu lineage were hidden from public view and protected by aides and bodyguards. Though they accompanied their father on inspections, they didn't appear in state media. Ju-ae's frequent presence marks a stark departure.

Repeated exposure in adult political environments is no small burden for a child. In state-released videos, she often appears distracted or uncomfortable during long events. A South Korean Unification Ministry official[88] noted that while Ju-ae initially appeared cheerful, recent photos reveal fatigue and darker expressions—signs that such ceremonies are emotionally taxing.

Due to this, Ju-ae reportedly receives private tutoring rather than attending school or studying abroad.[89] Her elite status limits her contact with peers. Psychologists believe she may grow accustomed to this environment

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[88] Yeon Seung (연승), "김정은 행사마다 동행하더니…김주애 안색 흙빛으로 변해 무슨일?" ["Always at Kim Jong-un's Side… Kim Ju-ae Appears Pale and Wan — What Happened?"], *Seoul Economic Daily*, September 6, 2023, https://www.sedaily.com/NewsView/29UKUYSJ6S (accessed September 18, 2025).

[89] Emma Bussey, "Kim Jong Un's Young Daughter Being Groomed to Lead Regime After Military Parade Visit in China: Expert," *Fox News*, September 2, 2025, https://www.foxnews.com/world/kim-jong-uns-young-daughter-being-groomed-lead-regime-military-parade-visit-china-expert (accessed September 18, 2025).

over time. Fathali Moghaddam of Georgetown University noted[90] her experience mirrors that of British royal heirs. Yet in North Korea, where no criticism is tolerated, Ju-ae faces a higher risk of developing narcissistic tendencies.

This is especially evident in public rituals. At North Korea's 2024 New Year countdown event, Kim Jong-un received flowers from children, while Ju-ae received hers from an adult woman who bowed deeply. Ju-ae accepted the gesture with apparent entitlement. Similar scenes appeared in October 2024 during the 79th anniversary of the Workers' Party. Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister, was seen bowing humbly to Ju-ae.

Such imagery shows that Ju-ae is being raised in an environment that ingrains authority and demands deference.

Moreover, Kim Jong-un is subtly introducing her to international diplomacy. Just as Kim himself met Chinese official Zhou Yongkang early in his career, Ju-ae's first known foreign counterpart is Russian Ambassador Alexander Matsegora. At the October 10, 2024 Party anniversary, Ju-ae shook Matsegora's hand and was seated beside him. She reappeared at Russia's May 9, 2025, Victory Day celebration at the Russian Embassy in Pyongyang, taking a seat of honor. These rare diplomatic outings suggest Ju-ae's grooming as a future leader is underway.

Experts believe she is too young for a formal title, but that internal succession training has already begun. Her appearances alongside Matsegora may signal to Russia that she is next in line—not merely a symbolic figure, but a key diplomatic asset in North Korea's evolving leadership narrative.

Chapter 5 — Skepticism and Intelligence Assessments

What North Koreans think

Experts on North Korea argue that Kim Jong-un's highly unusual decision to unveil his daughter, Kim Ju-ae, was less about establishing a successor and more about cultivating a familial image. Analysts believe the father-daughter appearances are crafted to show warmth and normalcy, positioning Ju-ae as a symbolic figure representing the future. This imagery, they argue, also sends a subtle message to younger generations: the military-first doctrine and nuclear strength are a legacy to be passed on.

Kim Kyu-hyun, former director of South Korea's National Intelligence Service under President Yoon Suk-yeol, emphasized[91] that Kim is attempting to present himself as a warm, affectionate father to his people. He dismissed the idea that Ju-ae is being groomed as a successor, suggesting instead that she is being used to humanize Kim and reinforce the regime's propaganda of a "benevolent parent-leader."

This family-centered propaganda strategy is not unique to North Korea. Other authoritarian leaders have historically employed similar tactics. Fidel Castro, though famously secretive about his personal life, revealed his son Fidelito in a 1959 interview, reinforcing his dual image as revolutionary and father. In that interview,

[90] Fathali M. Moghaddam, interview conducted by the author, January 2024.

[91] Park Jun-sang (박준상), "北 김주애는 후계자 아니다… 선전도구로 활용" ["Kim Ju-ae Is Not a Successor… Used as a Propaganda Tool"], *Kukmin Ilbo*, October 1, 2024, https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=1727701688.

Castro kissed his son and posed with both the child and a dog, highlighting his human side. Experts say this move helped bridge his revolutionary persona with that of a protector and patriarch preparing Cuba's future.

Even among North Korea's former elite, skepticism abounds regarding Kim Ju-ae's succession. Former high-ranking officials suggest that at only ten years old, she is far too young to be a viable heir. Unless Kim Jong-un is suffering from serious health issues, they believe he would not rush to name a successor.

Ri Jeong-ho, a former senior official in Office 39 of the Workers' Party who defected to the U.S. in 2016, claimed[92] Ju-ae's emergence was intended to check the rising influence of Kim Yo-jong, Kim's powerful sister. Since Ju-ae began appearing in public, Kim Yo-jong has appeared increasingly sidelined. Some observers have speculated tensions may exist between her and Kim's wife, Ri Sol-ju.

Defector-turned-author Jang Jin-sung, formerly of the United Front Department, and defector journalist Kim Ji-eun of Radio Free Asia both noted[93] that naming a successor early, especially a child, would weaken Kim Jong-un's grip on power. They cited the example of Kim Il-sung, who attempted to reclaim authority through unification diplomacy late in life after being eclipsed by Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il, learning from this, refused to name a successor until the very end to avoid similar power shifts.

According to former Workers' Party secretary Noh Hee-chang,[94] who defected after serving in the External Construction Guidance Bureau, Ju-ae's public appearances are meant to portray Kim as a devoted father. He claimed that in North Korea's male-dominated political culture, the notion of a female leader is almost inconceivable.

Defectors consistently express a desire to see their families freed from hereditary dictatorship. A 2024 report by South Korea's Ministry of Unification, based on interviews and surveys with 6,351 defectors over ten years, found rising opposition to dynastic rule. Opposition to Paektu bloodline succession rose from 37.8% before Kim Jong-un's rule to 44.4% in recent years. While this reflects the views of regime critics, it suggests a growing generational shift: younger respondents, especially those in their 20s and 30s, were far more critical than older ones.

Many younger defectors and inside sources report that skepticism has evolved into outright resentment. Kim Geum-hyuk,[95] a defector in his 30s who studied in Beijing before fleeing to South Korea, keeps in touch with North Korean students abroad. He said that many were shocked and confused by the suggestion that a 10-year-old girl could be the next leader. He noted that the so-called *jangmadang* ("market") generation—those shaped by the market culture that emerged after the collapse of the socialist food distribution system in the 1990s—are especially unreceptive.

Kang Gyuri, a woman in her 20s who escaped in 2023 after crossing the Northern Limit Line by boat, said[96] she lived nearly a year in North Korea after Ju-ae's public debut. While people could not openly discuss her appearance, close acquaintances began referring to her as "the princess." She claimed many were disappointed

[92] Ri Jeong-ho, interview by Jaewoo Park, April 2024.
[93] Kim Ji-eun, interview by Jaewoo Park.
[94] Noh Hee-chang, interview by Jaewoo Park.
[95] Kim Geum-hyuk, phone interview by Jaewoo Park, March 2024.
[96] Kang Gyuri, interview by Jaewoo Park, July 2024.

by her resemblance to Kim Jong-un rather than Ri Sol-ju. Older men, in particular, reacted negatively to the idea of a young girl as heir.

Interestingly, Kang said that Ju-ae's military facility inspections earned her the nickname "nuclear genius" among some citizens. North Koreans have long been taught a localized version of Mao Zedong's phrase: "Peace comes from the barrel of a gun." In this context, the nickname suggested a connection to succession. However, Kang expressed doubt that such ideas were truly organic, given widespread discontent with the idea of a fourth-generation succession.

Japanese outlet *Asia Press*, which monitors North Korea, reported[97] similar findings about public sentiment one year after Ju-ae's debut. Citing anonymous sources, they said rumors circulated portraying her as brilliant and possessing an extraordinary memory. One quote claimed, "She never forgets anything she sees even once." Other sources claimed, "Despite being young, she's already assisting Kim Jong-un as a genius and prodigy." Asia Press noted, however, that many believed such rumors were deliberately seeded by authorities.

A tale from Korean folklore may offer a parallel. In the *Samguk Yusa*, an ancient chronicle, young Seodong spreads a song in Silla's capital claiming that Princess Seonhwa secretly loved him. The rumor became so widespread that he eventually married the princess and later became King Mu of Baekje. Like Seodong, the North Korean regime may be promoting wishful narratives about Ju-ae's greatness to shape public perception as if her succession were already a foregone conclusion.

Does the CIA Know the True Heir?

When people think of U.S. intelligence, the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) usually comes to mind. But the U.S. has 18 intelligence agencies in total, including the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), the National Security Agency (NSA), the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). These agencies work collaboratively to support U.S. policymakers with information that gives Washington an edge in diplomacy and global competition.

North Korea is a key focus for U.S. intelligence gathering. But due to the reclusive nature of the regime, collecting information through conventional means remains extremely difficult. Former intelligence officials say that North Korean intelligence is gathered through a combination of satellite imagery, signals intelligence (SIGINT), human intelligence (HUMINT), and open-source analysis. These methods are used to assess military capabilities, economic conditions, diplomatic posture, and especially leadership dynamics—with succession issues being a critical area of interest.

One former U.S. official recalled[98] that ahead of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's October 2000 visit to North Korea, the intelligence community provided detailed briefings. A State Department staffer who accompanied her was surprised at the level of detail, including a full "family tree" of the North Korean leadership, political relationships, and internal dynamics. Analysts even predicted that Kim Jong-il would

[97] "One Year After the Emergence of Kim Ju-ae: How Do North Korean Residents View Her?," *Asia Press*, November 28, 2023, https://www.asiapress.org/korean/2023/11/politics/joo-ae.
[98] In-person interview by Jaewoo Park, November 2023.

postpone the official meeting to the last minute to heighten tension and gain a psychological edge—a tactic that played out exactly as forecast.

In general, U.S. agencies lead in technical intelligence such as satellites and signals collection, while South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) contributes heavily through HUMINT. Intelligence sharing between Washington and Seoul remains a crucial element in assessing the regime.

The U.S. employs a wide range of experts to analyze North Korea, including psychologists to interpret a dictator's behavior and physicians who examine Kim Jong-un's health from photos and video footage. Yet despite the expertise and technology, penetrating North Korea remains extraordinarily difficult.

Interviews with those who have met Kim Jong-un—such as former NBA player Dennis Rodman, foreign diplomats posted in Pyongyang, senior defectors, and elite insiders—are key sources. Calls Kim has made, close-range satellite images, and analysis by North Korea-focused outlets such as HRNK, 38 North, Beyond Parallel, RFA, and VOA all contribute to the intelligence picture. These media use commercial satellites capable of 30 cm to 3 m resolution to monitor missile sites, nuclear facilities, military parades, and prison camps. While commercial imagery can detect significant activity, legal restrictions limit its commercial use. Government-operated satellites, such as those run by the NRO, are believed to be far more advanced—reportedly capable of reading a newspaper from space or recognizing faces. The KeyHole (KH) series, among the most advanced, is said to distinguish license plates and facial expressions from orbit.

When asked about Kim Jong-un's succession and his children, a U.S. intelligence official declined to provide specifics, citing the sensitivity of the matter. The official appeared unsure how many children Kim has or whether they are sons or daughters.

Former analysts who worked on North Korea offered mixed interpretations of Kim Ju-ae's role. Rachel Minyoung Lee, a former the U.S. Open Source Center analyst who specialized in monitoring North Korean media like *Rodong Sinmun* and *KCNA*, offered[99] a compelling take: she believes Ju-ae's public debut may have been partly prompted by Dennis Rodman's previous mention of her, making it harder to keep her hidden. Lee noted that no definitive "smoking gun" in state media confirms Ju-ae as the heir.

Bruce Klingner, a former CIA deputy division chief for Korea and now senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, argued[100] that Ju-ae's childlike public demeanor—holding her father's hand and touching his cheek—makes her an unlikely successor. In contrast, Kim Jong-un's own debut was marked by propaganda boasting about his thesis on enhancing artillery accuracy using GPS. The message was clear: he was to be revered. Kim is known to have studied artillery at the Kim Il-sung Military University.

Sydney Seiler, who served until 2023 as North Korea mission manager at the National Intelligence Council (NIC), warned[101] that Ju-ae's growing prominence could backfire if there is a hidden successor. Her presence may complicate future transitions. He noted that Ju-ae's involvement in military settings could be interpreted as grooming a female leader, a rare possibility in North Korea.

[99] Rachel Minyoung Lee, interview by Jaewoo Park, October 2024.
[100] Bruce Klingner, in-person interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.
[101] Sydney Seiler, phone interview by Jaewoo Park, May 2024.

Jung Pak, a former CIA, NIC, U.S. State Department senior official, and author of *Becoming Kim Jong-un*, said[102] in a past interview that Ju-ae's appearances are clearly deliberate. Over the past decade, Pak noted, Kim Jong-un has shown he is always capable of surprising both insiders and outsiders alike.

South Korea's National Intelligence Service and Government Perspectives

Inter-Korean relations are unique in nature. Over more than 70 years, they have experienced repeated cycles of dialogue and conflict, during which the character of intelligence-gathering in North Korea has evolved. While South Korea lacks the cutting-edge technology of the United States, it shares a common language and similar culture with the North, which offers advantages in both direct and indirect exchanges; infiltration operations—often labeled as espionage—and the interrogation of defectors. South Korea uses both human intelligence (HUMINT) and technical intelligence (TECHINT), and in HUMINT it arguably matches or exceeds most countries. In reality, only South Korea, China, and perhaps Japan are capable of operating effective human intelligence networks focused on North Korea.

South Korea's intelligence community includes the National Intelligence Service (NIS), the South Korean Ministry of Unification (which handles inter-Korean affairs), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which gathers information via diplomatic channels), and the Ministry of National Defense (which handles military intelligence). Among them, the NIS is generally seen as having the deepest repository of information on North Korea. However, under South Korea's Presidential Act, the NIS operates under the direct supervision of the president, meaning the agency's priorities can shift depending on the political orientation of the administration.

Former NIS officials have expressed skepticism about the theory that Kim Ju-ae could be Kim Jong-un's successor. Dr. Kwak Gil-seop, a former NIS North Korea analyst with over 30 years of experience, suggested[103] that the regime's spotlight on Kim Ju-ae, following earlier attention on Kim Yo-jong, was another ploy to attract international attention. He referred to Kim Ju-ae as a "cameo" figure, noting that she is only around 10 years old, lacks the required political status, and hasn't even started the process of joining the Workers' Party.

Han Ki-bum, who served as NIS Deputy Director from 2013 to 2016, recalled[104] that during his tenure—when Kim Jong-un had just risen to power—there was little room for discussion about succession. While they were able to confirm that Ri Sol-ju was pregnant and gave birth, information about the child's identity or significance wasn't considered valuable at the time. The idea of a fourth-generation hereditary succession only began circulating after Kim Ju-ae appeared publicly, and Han speculated that the current administration is closely watching her emergence.

From my own conversations with former intelligence officials from both South Korea and the U.S., it seems that rather than focusing too heavily on the still-speculative question of whether Kim Ju-ae will be the successor, they are more concerned with the concrete issue of how to denuclearize North Korea. Some even expressed a sense of pessimism, doubting that predictions about future North Korean leadership would prove meaningful or accurate.

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[102] Song Sang-ho and Kim Dong-hyun, "(Yonhap Interview) U.S. Nuclear Envoy Says No Indications of 'Direct' N.K. Military Action, Stresses 'Sincerity' in Dialogue," *Yonhap News Agency*, February 4, 2024, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240204000200315.
[103] Dr. Kwak Gil-seop, interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.
[104] Han Ki-bum, interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.

So, how much does the NIS actually know about Kim Jong-un's children and succession plans? According to former NIS officials,[105] it's likely that a dedicated department within the agency continues to monitor the Kim family's finances and family structure. One way to gauge NIS capabilities is through reports submitted to the National Assembly's Intelligence Committee. In 2017, the NIS officially commented on Kim Jong-un's children for the first time, reporting that he likely had a son born in 2010, a daughter—presumed to be Kim Ju-ae—born in 2013, and a third child of unknown gender born in 2017.

However, following my exclusive interviews with Joao Micaelo—Kim Jong-un's schoolmate from Switzerland—and Dennis Rodman and his manager Chris Volo who accompanied him on visits to North Korea, questions arose about whether a son actually exists. Micaelo, who visited Pyongyang in 2013 at Kim's invitation, said that while Kim spoke about his daughter, he never mentioned a son. Rodman also reported that during four visits to North Korea, they met many members of Kim's family and inner circle but never encountered any signs of a son.

This has led senior South Korean officials, such as those from the Ministry of Unification and the Korea Institute for National Unification, to suggest that Kim Ju-ae—born in 2013—might actually be the eldest child. The NIS had initially inferred the existence of a 2010-born son based on increased imports of boys' toys into North Korea, a theory now being reassessed.

As Kim Ju-ae continues to appear at high-profile events, particularly those with military implications, South Korean officials are increasingly acknowledging the plausibility of her becoming a successor. At a National Assembly audit in October 2023, Former Unification Minister Kim Young-ho stated, "Considering her continued public appearances, we must leave open the possibility of her being the successor." In January 2024, NIS Director Cho Tae-yong remarked in a written response to a confirmation hearing, "We may have moved from asking, 'Could Kim Ju-ae be the successor?' to 'Isn't she likely the successor?'"

Six months later, the NIS assessed that North Korean authorities are implying that Kim Ju-ae is the most probable heir and that she is undergoing successor training. Furthermore, the 2025 edition of the Ministry of Unification's official textbook *Understanding North Korea* upgraded its assessment from the 2024 edition. The phrase describing the fourth-generation hereditary succession changed from "There is a high possibility" to "There is a strong likelihood." While this does not officially confirm her role as successor, experts note the shift reflects growing confidence in this scenario. In official government documents, "high possibility" implies theoretical likelihood, while "strong likelihood" indicates practical probability—a subtle but meaningful difference, according to experts.

No Smoking Gun—Yet

Even if Kim Ju-ae is receiving successor training, most experts agree that it will take considerable time before she is formally designated due to her young age. Analysts say it is still too early to make definitive conclusions, as a full-fledged "succession campaign" has not yet emerged. While some public expressions surrounding Kim Ju-ae have caused a stir, these alone do not yet confirm her as the designated heir.

[105] Interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.

Rachel Lee noted[106] that the regime has not yet launched an internal, symbolic succession campaign surrounding Kim Ju-ae. Her public appearances may hint at a fourth-generation hereditary succession, but Lee argues that without the usual idolization process within North Korea—one that includes symbolic language and repeated motifs—there is no definitive indication she has been officially designated.

Lee pointed out that when Kim Jong-un's succession campaign was underway in the early 2000s, leading up to 2008–2009, a number of new terms and symbols were gradually introduced in North Korean media. Many of these were later understood to reference his status as heir. Among the most notable was the frequent invocation of the "Paektu bloodline," though the meaning of such phrases was not immediately clear at the time. Because succession is a highly sensitive matter within the regime, especially one tied to regime stability, these symbols were subtly embedded in official discourse long before state media made any explicit declarations.

Russian-born North Korea specialist Fyodor Tertitskiy predicts[107] that if Kim Ju-ae is formally designated as successor, her real name will be revealed and featured in a different or bold font in internal documents and military publications. In his comparative study of the succession campaigns of Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, Tertitskiy outlines what such a campaign might look like.

While the succession processes of Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un were different, they followed a similar pattern in early stages. Kim Jong-il's campaign was gradual and spanned over a decade, while Kim Jong-un's was rapid—compressed into three years due to his father's deteriorating health. Tertitskiy describes Kim Jong-un's succession as an "unfinished campaign," essentially a replica of Kim Jong-il's.

In both cases, initial internal campaigns praised the heirs' achievements and encouraged the military and party apparatus to learn from their greatness, all without direct public exposure. Once internal preparations were complete, their images and titles began to appear in official media, culminating in public announcements of their positions and unique titles.

International psychologist Ian Robertson of Ireland explains[108] that authoritarian leaders often perceive themselves as divine figures and see their children as semi-divine heirs, making such succession campaigns a logical progression in their worldview.

Kim Jong-il's succession process began covertly in the early 1970s. At the time, state documentaries referred to him as the "revered leader" but avoided naming him directly, instead using the euphemism "Party Center."[109] In February 1974, he was formally endorsed as successor during the 8th Plenary Session of the 5th Central Committee of the Workers' Party. Praise songs, slogans, and public adoration followed within the party, military, and government, though media did not yet make it official. It wasn't until six years later, at age 38, that Kim Jong-il appeared at a military parade. His status as successor was formally declared at the Sixth Party Congress in 1980 when he was elected to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee. From then on, state media ramped up its promotion of his image and achievements.

[106] Rachel Lee, virtual interview by Jaewoo Park, October 2023.
[107] Fyodor Tertitskiy, phone interview by Jaewoo Park, January 2025.
[108] Ian Robertson, interview by Jaewoo Park, January 2024.
[109] Fyodor Tertitskiy (표도르 째르치즈스키), "김정일 승계 캠페인 연구" ["Study on Kim Jong-il's Succession Campaign"], *ResearchGate*, September 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361307353_gimjeong-il_seung-gye_kaempein_yeongu.

Kim Jong-un's campaign, though brief due to his father's rapid decline, was tightly orchestrated. First referenced in 2009 as "Young General" within the military, his existence was publicly hinted at when Taiwanese tourists captured a slogan in Wonsan reading, "Young General Kim Jong-un, heir to the Paektu bloodline." This early signal marked the internal start of his grooming. In June 2010, North Korean state media began indirectly referencing him with the term "Party Center," just as had been done with Kim Jong-il. On September 28, 2010, Kim Jong-un was officially appointed Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission during the Third Party Conference, confirming his succession. Two days later, a commemorative group photo released by state media included Kim Jong-un for the first time. His first public appearance came on October 10, 2010, during the 65th anniversary of the Workers' Party. A video of the event cemented his public image as successor. Despite being an "unfinished campaign" due to Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, Kim Jong-un's cult of personality continued after his rise to power. He was soon referred to as the "Dear Respected Marshal," "Successor of the Revolutionary Cause," and "Benevolent Father." Following the execution of Jang Song-thaek in 2013, state media upgraded his title to "Great Leader." In 2021, *Rodong Sinmun* finally called him "Suryong" (Supreme Leader), signaling the final stage of idolization.

If Kim Ju-ae is to become heir, what might her succession campaign look like? While not yet confirmed, her current appearances suggest that a preparatory phase is already underway. First, her name may be publicly revealed in state media, potentially under a new or slightly altered version—perhaps Kim Ju-ae or Kim Ju-ye, surprising analysts. Like the names of her predecessors, it may be printed in bold, emphasizing her rank. Her photos with Kim Jong-un might begin to appear more frequently in propaganda materials, and her name highlighted in thicker red fonts.

Second, internal party documents might begin referring to her as the "Party Center," a term historically used for designated successors. The use of this expression with Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un granted legitimacy to their claim to power. Kim Yo-jong has also been referred to as "Party Center," which once sparked speculation about her potential as successor, though this was never confirmed.

Third, Kim Ju-ae's formal designation as heir could trigger changes in the status of her aunt, Kim Yo-jong. North Korea's dynastic tradition includes sidelining close competitors once an heir is chosen. For instance, Kim Yong-ju was marginalized during Kim Jong-il's succession, and Kim Jong-nam fell victim to Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power.

If Kim Ju-ae is truly being groomed for succession, the campaign will likely follow a gradual but symbolically rich path—one that draws from past precedent but adapts to current internal and external political needs.

Chapter 6 — Clues in the Cult of Personality

What Her Clothing Says in a "Theater State"

"Clothing reflects one's ideological and emotional state, cultural sensibility, and moral character." — Kim Hyang-suk, Institute of Apparel Etiquette, Academy of Light Industry Science, "On Dress Etiquette," DPRK Women, August 2003

Fashion serves as a tool for political communication. It allows political figures to imprint their intended messages more clearly and effectively upon the public. In North Korea—a theatrical state that mobilizes propaganda across every domain of life, from politics to culture—fashion takes on an even more dramatic significance.

Notably, Kim Ju-ae's emergence has been portrayed not primarily through *Rodong Sinmun* headlines but rather in images and footage from the state-run Korean Central Television. These visuals evoke far more visceral, nonverbal, and multisensory impressions. That's precisely why analyzing her clothing holds notable value.

When Kim Ju-ae first appeared in public, South Korean media headlined her as the "daughter who closely resembles Kim Jong-un." For reasons unknown, her first appearance was surprisingly unpolished: she wore a white padded jacket to brace the cold and red flat shoes that seemed outdated. With tousled hair and a round child's face, she looked like any other 10-year-old girl accompanying her father at work. But her second appearance marked a shift. With makeup, a neatly styled haircut, and a black coat paired with high heels, she exuded a more sophisticated aura reminiscent of her mother, Ri Sol-ju. From that point forward, her image showed the unmistakable touch of professional stylists.

On February 7, 2023, during the commemorative banquet for the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army, Kim Ju-ae was seated at the head table between her father, Kim Jong-un, and her mother, Ri Sol-ju—flanked by top military brass. The next day, at the military parade marking the same anniversary, she donned a stylish hat and brooch, seated in the most prominent seat among the dignitaries, sporting fashion that clearly aimed to impress.

In March and April of that year, Kim Ju-ae accompanied her father during the launch of the Hwasong-17 and Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles, capable of striking the U.S. mainland. During those appearances, she wore a luxury padded coat by Dior, a detail that drew heavy media coverage across South Korea and abroad. While the Kim family's penchant for luxury is well known, this particular display stood in stark contrast to the starvation conditions many North Koreans were suffering under, making it a subject of international scrutiny.

Following this backlash, a subtle shift occurred. During a visit to the National Aerospace Development Administration (NADA) just days later, Kim Ju-ae was seen in a modest white blouse reportedly costing about $15, believed to be Chinese-made. According to *RFA*,[110] this move came amid internal discontent among North Koreans who viewed her extravagant clothing with disapproval. The swift pivot to modest apparel suggested Pyongyang was monitoring foreign and domestic reactions closely. South Korea's National Intelligence Service

[110] Cho Jin-woo, "김주애, '명품사랑' 비판 의식? 이번엔 저가 옷 입은 듯" ["Kim Ju-ae, Conscious of Criticism Over Her 'Luxury Fashion'? This Time, She Appears in Low-Cost Clothing"], *Radio Free Asia (Korean Service)*, April 20, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/food_international_org/nk_nuclear_talks-04202023144420.html.

(NIS) later assessed that North Korean authorities were adjusting the frequency and tone of Kim Ju-ae's public appearances while keeping other activities behind closed doors.

In fact, Kim Jong-un once issued an unprecedented apology in 2020 for the killing of a South Korean fisheries official in the West Sea. The gesture, which came amid stalled inter-Korean relations and collapsed U.S.–North Korea talks, was interpreted as a strategic move to keep diplomatic channels open with Seoul. The recent efforts to present Kim Ju-ae in a modest light could be seen in a similar vein—an attempt to manage international and domestic perceptions of a potential future successor.

A notable pattern in her appearances is the predominance of black coats. Fashion consultant Lauren Rothman, who advises U.S. politicians on clothing choices and messaging, analyzed[111] Kim Ju-ae's fashion evolution. Rothman noted that the early white padded coat gave way to consistently darker tones, suggesting an intentional shift. In the fashion world, white evokes softness, innocence, and youth—not sharpness or authority. Later, Kim Ju-ae began adding sharp accents like brooches to her jackets, reinforcing a more assertive image. Rothman dubbed this progression "legacy fashion"—a wardrobe that communicates inherited power.

Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's younger sister and a top propaganda figure, also typically appears in dark, utilitarian office attire, symbolizing gravitas and responsibility. Her rare public appearance in white was during the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, when she attended a North Korean musical performance in Seoul and sat beside South Korean President Moon Jae-in. The image symbolized a thaw in inter-Korean relations. Similarly, Kim Jong-un himself has used clothing to signal intent—donning black Mao suits for major events or foreign meetings, and wearing more relaxed attire for public inspections.

With few exceptions—such as her debut and the Dior coat controversy—Kim Ju-ae has consistently appeared in dark-colored jackets, occasionally punctuated with inexpensive white blouses. One especially telling moment came on Air Force Day in December, when she wore a long leather trench coat and sunglasses, mirroring her father's outfit. This style of coat, first introduced by Kim Jong-un in 2019 during a ceremony in Samjiyon, has since become a symbol of "supreme dignity." It has been worn only by select elites like Premier Kim Tok-hun, Party Secretary Jo Yong-won, Kim Yo-jong, and Hyun Song-wol—rarely by non-military officials.

Significantly, official photos from that day placed Kim Ju-ae in front of her father—an extraordinary move in North Korea's political iconography, where the leader is never visually subordinated. Rothman noted that her coordinated outfits with Kim Jong-un, including matching hats and sunglasses, signal a nonverbal message of unity: "they are one."

At several events, Kim Ju-ae wore makeup and high heels, appearing more like a grown woman than a child. Though only 10 years old, she stood nearly shoulder-to-shoulder with her father, a visual cue that underscores her emerging symbolic stature.

In 2015, the Associated Press held a photo exhibition of images taken in Pyongyang.[112] North Korean officials reportedly insisted that photos of other individuals be smaller than Kim Jong-un's. His image was eventually displayed in a gold-framed portrait as the centerpiece. The staging of Kim Ju-ae's appearances—complete with

[111] Park Jaewoo, "'I Love Seeing the Quiet Power That She Really Exudes in These Pictures.' American Stylist Analyzes the Fashion of North Korea's 'Respected Daughter,'" *Radio Free Asia (Korean Service)*, February 13, 2024, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/fashion-02132024165208.html.
[112] Interview with former Associated Press staff member.

high heels and dominant placement in official imagery—may reflect similar directives from the highest levels of the regime.

Rothman also noted that Ri Sol-ju, Kim Ju-ae's mother, typically appears in bright, elegant attire—emphasizing traditional and graceful femininity, particularly when accompanying Kim Jong-un to summits with South Korea or China. Her style evokes that of a First Lady or royal consort. In contrast, Kim Ju-ae's style leans heavily into dark tones, structured jackets, and assertive silhouettes, projecting leadership and political purpose rather than family warmth.

In that sense, Kim Ju-ae's fashion aligns more closely with her father's than her mother's. This visual strategy has been matched by a gradual evolution in how North Korean state media refers to her.

"The Great Persons of Guidance"

On November 19, 2022, when North Korea announced the test launch of the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile, state media outlets—*Korean Central News Agency* (*KCNA*), *Rodong Sinmun*, and Korean Central Television—referred to the girl appearing beside leader Kim Jong-un as "beloved daughter," marking the first official reference to Kim Ju-ae.

Three months later, in February 2023, Kim Ju-ae reappeared with her father at the groundbreaking ceremony for a new residential area in Pyongyang's Sopho District. State media again used the term "beloved daughter," and noted that Kim Jong-un "broke the first ground for construction together with his most beloved child."

Jung Seong-jang, director of the Center for North Korean Studies at South Korea's Sejong Institute, interpreted[113] this change in terminology—from "beloved daughter" to "most beloved"—as a possible indicator that Kim Ju-ae was being positioned as the favored child and a potential successor, especially in a system where a leader may have multiple children.

Since her debut, North Korea's state media has used various honorifics to describe Kim Ju-ae. Some analysts have speculated that these changes represent a rapid elevation in status. One week after her debut, during a commemorative photo session for the successful missile launch, she was referred to as "respected." Two months later, at a banquet marking the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army, she was called "revered." These titles were striking, as they were previously reserved for top leadership figures.

However, subsequent appearances used less elevated terms again, including "beloved daughter" at a sports event 10 days later and at another groundbreaking ceremony. In May 2025, during a visit to the Russian Embassy, she was referred to as "most beloved daughter." Media continued to alternate between expressions.

Jung noted that titles in North Korea carry deep political significance. He pointed out that the term "revered" (*jonggyohasin* · 존귀하신) had only been used for Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, and Kim Jong-suk, Kim Il-sung's wife and an anti-Japanese guerrilla figure. "Respected" (*jonkyohaneun* · 존경하는) was also used

[113] Jung Seong-jang, interview by Jaewoo Park, September 2023.

during Kim Jong-un's grooming as heir. Still, some experts argued that despite the elevated language, it was premature to label Kim Ju-ae as the definitive successor.

At the time, South Korea's government took a cautious stance. But that began to shift after reports emerged of a military lecture held following the launch of North Korea's military reconnaissance satellite, during which Kim Ju-ae was deified as the "Shining Star of Korea" (*Saethyulyejanggun: 샛별여장군*), a title used to signal a new era.

"The future of the space-power era will shine brighter under the leadership of the young General, the Shining Star of Korea (Kim Ju-ae)," one report[114] proclaimed.

Photos from the celebratory banquet showed Kim Ju-ae seated next to Kim Jong-un, closely examining documents. Analysts interpreted this as symbolic of her deepening involvement in military and state affairs.

The symbolism of a "shining star" carries weight in North Korean political mythology. While today Kim Il-sung is universally called the "Sun," he was referred to as a "morning star" in films depicting his anti-Japanese struggle. Kim Jong-il, too, was called the "Bright Star" and "Guiding Star" before being elevated posthumously as the "Sun of Military-first Politics." This evolution—from a star to the sun—has traditionally signaled the transformation from heir to supreme leader.

Kim Jong-un was reportedly known as the "Shining Star General" during his childhood. At around age nine—about the same age Kim Ju-ae is now—a propaganda song titled "Steps" (*Balgeoreum*: *발걸음*) was composed in his honor and performed in front of Kim Jong-il and his inner circle. He then began his succession training. After Kim Jong-un was officially named successor in 2009, "Steps" became a staple at major state events.

The lyrics of "Steps" included the following lines:

"Step, step, step, step, step—our General Kim's steps.
Advancing in the spirit of February's great achievements.
Let the steps echo ever higher—
Marching swiftly toward a shining future."

In the song, Kim Jong-un was called "General Kim," part of his idolization as the "Young General." The reference to Kim Ju-ae as the "Young General, the Shining Star" appears to be a parallel form of deification.

Equally notable is the reported addition of "female general" to the title "Shining Star of Korea." In Kim Jong-un's case, his titles evolved over time—from "Shining Star General" in his youth to "Respected General Comrade" in 2010, then "Dear Respected Marshal" following Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, and eventually "Great Leader" after the execution of Jang Song-thaek in 2013.

When asked, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) neither confirmed nor denied Kim Ju-ae's succession status, saying only that "various possibilities are being tracked." Tae Yong-ho, a defector and former

[114] Son Hye-min, "북, '조선의 샛별' 김주애 신격화 공식 선포" ["North Korea Officially Declares Kim Ju-ae as 'Joseon's New Star'"], *Radio Free Asia (Korean Service)*, November 27, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks/kjaidolization-11272023091706.html.

North Korean diplomat turned lawmaker, stated: "If those reports are true, the succession structure is almost finalized."

In January 2024, North Korea's state media began listing Kim Ju-ae as "Respected Daughter" ahead of other officials in coverage of state events. Typically, reports would begin with "Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un," followed by a list of accompanying senior officials. Kim Ju-ae's mention directly after Kim suggested a new political ranking.

The apex of her honorific titles came in March 2024, when she attended the inauguration of a greenhouse farm with Kim Jong-un. For the first time, state media referred to her as one of the *"Great Persons of Guidance."* Media described both Kim Jong-un and Kim Ju-ae using the phrase.

According to North Korea's *Great Korean Dictionary*, "Guidance" (*hyangdo*: 향도) is defined as "illuminating the way forward in the revolutionary struggle and leading along the path of victory." It is a term historically reserved for the top leadership or the Workers' Party itself. South Korea's Unification Ministry noted that the use of "Guidance" in reference to Kim Ju-ae signaled her rising status and could not rule out her as a future successor. The NIS, in its July 29, 2024 briefing to the National Assembly's Intelligence Committee, also noted Kim Ju-ae is being groomed as the most likely heir.

Secret Symbols Signaling Succession

One of the most shocking images since Kim Ju-ae's emergence as a public figure was captured during the military parade marking the 75th anniversary of the founding of North Korea's armed forces in September 2023. At Kim Il-sung Square in Pyongyang, Kim Ju-ae was seen tenderly stroking the cheek of her father, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un—the nation's "supreme dignity." The gesture was unprecedented. Even Kim's wife, Ri Sol-ju, has never been shown engaging in such an intimate display.

South Korean singer Baek Ji-young, who visited Pyongyang in 2018 as part of a South Korean cultural delegation, later recalled in a YouTube video[115] that Kim Jong-un and Ri Sol-ju appeared to maintain a strictly hierarchical relationship.

"They didn't feel like a couple," Baek said in a December 14, 2023, video. *"Couples exchange glances, maybe a touch on the shoulder—something natural. But they looked completely vertical, not horizontal."*

Her comments cast doubt on the family image projected by North Korean state media. In contrast, Kim Ju-ae's interactions with her father appear natural, warm, and affectionate—perhaps a subtle reflection of the hierarchy within the "Paektu bloodline," the ruling family lineage, versus others.

Beyond titles, North Korean media has repeatedly presented symbolic imagery suggesting Kim Ju-ae may be a successor. One prominent example is her appearance at the military parade on February 8, 2023, marking the

[115] Baek Ji-young (백지영), "청와대에서 연락받고 북한 갔다온 썰" ["The Story of How the Blue House Contacted Me for a Visit to North Korea"], *YouTube*, August 12, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLc-3VP64Ms.

75th anniversary of the Korean People's Army. State television described a majestic white horse—a deeply loaded symbol in North Korea—as leading the cavalry, followed closely by Kim Ju-ae's own horse.

"*Our Marshal's legendary Paektu warhorse, who galloped through the Paektu front, leads the cavalry. Behind it, the most beloved daughter's most beloved loyal horse joins the vibrant march,*" the narrator proclaimed.

The white horse, associated with Mt. Paektu and revolutionary bloodlines, has been a central icon since the 1970s during Kim Il-sung's mythologization. Kim Jong-un's personal white horse is visually distinct, equipped with a golden bridle. In this parade, Kim Ju-ae's horse followed directly behind Kim Jong-un's, separated from other horses—a subtle but unmistakable suggestion of her standing.

Her horse reappeared during another major event on July 27, 2023, the 70th anniversary of the Korean War armistice, though Kim Ju-ae herself did not attend due to the presence of foreign dignitaries such as Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. State TV referred to the pair of horses as "two revolutionary steeds known throughout the world."

Though Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister, has also appeared on horseback alongside him, Kim Ju-ae's appearances differ—she is regularly featured at military events, signaling a closer alignment with the armed forces. At multiple parades, her horse followed only Kim Jong-un's, reinforcing a narrative of succession.

At the 2023 parade, elite units shouted for the first time, "We will defend the Paektu bloodline to the death," following the standard chant, "We will defend the Supreme Commander with our lives." This phrase was repeated at later parades. Historically, parades have signaled leadership transitions—Kim Jong-il was introduced at a 1992 parade, while Kim Jong-un debuted publicly at the 65th anniversary of the Workers' Party in 2010.

While Kim Jong-il once looked on with concern at a young Kim Jong-un, recent footage shows a beaming Kim Jong-un walking alongside Kim Ju-ae, suggesting confidence in her future role. Few analysts today deny that such symbolism hints at a potential fourth-generation hereditary succession.

Sydney Seiler, former U.S. National Intelligence Officer for North Korea, agrees.[116] He said efforts to portray Kim Ju-ae as well-versed in military matters may be aimed at overcoming perceptions of vulnerability associated with a female successor. In North Korea, where the military is foundational to power, associating Ju-ae with missiles, nuclear weapons, and military inspections serves to project that she is prepared.

In another unprecedented move, Kim Ju-ae appeared on North Korean postage stamps. The Korea Stamp Corporation released six commemorative designs marking the Hwasong-17 launch on November 18, 2022—her public debut. She appears in five of them. Some downplayed the significance, arguing she simply accompanied Kim Jong-un. But shortly after, North Korea designated the launch date as "Missile Industry Day," elevating its importance.

On August 17, 2023, state media marked the 70th anniversary of the opening of the Fatherland Liberation War Victory Museum. Two archival photos were released, reportedly showing Kim Il-sung with his daughter. Observers speculated the release was intended to normalize Kim Ju-ae's public image by drawing historical parallels and quelling internal dissent.

[116] Sydney Seiler, phone interview by Jaewoo Park, March 2024.

Analysts have even scrutinized[117] her clapping. In North Korea, most officials perform a high, rapid "seal clap" at nose level. Only the top leaders—Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un—have clapped slowly with hands at a lower angle, a symbolic gesture of supreme status. Recently, Kim Ju-ae was seen clapping in the same manner.

This clapping style once drew attention to Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong-un's uncle. Before his purge in 2013, Jang used the distinctive clap, leading intelligence analysts[118] to warn it was a dangerous signal, suggesting he overstepped his place in the hierarchy.

While symbolic interpretations require caution, they remain a key lens for reading opaque North Korean politics.

Some experts argue Kim Ju-ae's appearances are part of a strategy to present Kim Jong-un as a modern family man and normalize leadership. Yet the nuclear state narrative continues. Her repeated appearances with Kim at military sites—not with her mother—reinforce this. Ri Sol-ju, though occasionally visible in camera shots, is often omitted from state media, possibly to emphasize Ju-ae's prominence.

Kim Ju-ae often appears unusually composed for her age. She smiles, gestures to civilians, whispers to officials—all actions far from those expected of a typical 12-year-old. Her demeanor signals preparation for leadership.

On April 17, 2025, state TV aired footage of a performance marking the completion of a 10,000-unit housing complex in Pyongyang's Hwasong district. The footage featured multiple close-ups of Kim Ju-ae, clapping and singing along, smiling warmly at residents, and whispering in their ears. It was a rare moment showing her publicly interacting with citizens—more than just a child in tow, she was performing the role of a leader in training.

This mirrors the early lives of Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, who also accompanied their fathers on field inspections. While such events weren't broadcast at the time, propaganda films released later—such as the one commemorating the late Hyon Chol-hae, Kim Jong-un's military mentor—have emphasized these early grooming processes.

One final clue: In 2021, North Korea revived the position of First Secretary of the Workers' Party—the post once held by Kim Jong-un before he became General Secretary in 2016. Though no official link to Kim Ju-ae has been announced, the position is widely seen as the second-in-command.

Initially, some speculated the post might go to Kim Yo-jong or senior aide Jo Yong-won. But in light of Kim Ju-ae's emergence, a senior South Korean government official[119] said it's plausible the role was created for her. Given that no one would propose such a position while Kim Jong-un is alive unless it came from him, it may be a preemptive step toward transition.

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[117] Kim Tae-hyun (김태현), "SBS [정치쇼] 양욱 '北, 저따위로 핵잠수함?'…박원곤 '결국 그 길 가는 게 북한'" ["SBS *Politics Show* Yang Wook: 'A Nuclear Submarine Like That in North Korea?' … Park Won-gon: 'In the End, That's the Path North Korea Will Take.'"], *SBS News*, September 11, 2023, https://news.sbs.co.kr/news/endPage.do?news_id=N1007342452&plink=COPYPASTE&cooper=SBSNEWSEND.

[118] Kim, "SBS [정치쇼] 양욱 '北, 저따위로 핵잠수함?'…"

[119] Unification Ministry, background briefing, December 2023.

This structural change came amid renewed speculation about Kim Jong-un's health and as the regime adjusted to border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be unwise to ignore its implications.

Why CNN's Reporting on Kim Jong-un's Health Shouldn't Be Ignored

In April 2020, South Korean defector-led outlet *Daily NK*[120] reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un underwent cardiovascular surgery on April 12 and was recuperating at a villa near Pyongyang. The report cited unnamed sources inside North Korea and noted his 20-day absence from public events as fuel for the story.

Shortly thereafter, U.S. major broadcaster CNN—citing anonymous U.S. officials—reported Kim was in "grave danger" following the surgery, and speculated that if he did not survive, his sister Kim Yo-jong might succeed him, with serious implications for stability in Northeast Asia.

Kim's absence from the Day of the Sun celebrations on April 15—marking the birthday of his grandfather and founder of North Korea, Kim Il-sung—was unprecedented and deepened concerns.

CNN's Korean bureau reportedly complained about poor coordination with its Washington team, and the article drew criticism as governments in Seoul, Washington, and Beijing publicly stated they had no confirmation of Kim's condition.

Later, the Washington Post described the episode as a chaotic mix of "misinformation, speculation, and unverified claims." *TMZ* even reported Kim's death, while *MSNBC* host Katie Tur tweeted he was "brain-dead," later deleting the post and apologizing.

In South Korea, defectors turned legislators Thae Yong-ho and Ji Sung-ho amplified the rumors, using provocative phrases like "unable to stand" and "99 percent dead." Former Blue House official Jang Sung-min called his condition "irrecoverable".

Then U.S. President Donald Trump dismissed the CNN report as "fake news," but the controversy persisted. Ultimately, Kim reappeared publicly two weeks later—on May 1 at a fertilizer plant in Suncheon—effectively marking the scandal as a false alarm.

Public speculation about his health, however, did not subside. Kim is reported to be about 170 cm tall, weighing over 140 kg, well above the 63-kg average, indicating severe obesity. South Korea's NIS noted his weight climbed from about 90 kg in 2011 to 120 kg in 2014, and over 140 kg currently—a gain of 40 kg in recent years, a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

A black mark on Kim's wrist—captured after his disappearance—prompted speculation of surgical intervention. South Korea's NIS reported in July 2024 that Kim showed signs of hypertension and diabetes since his early 30s. It warned that without changes, inherited heart disease could manifest, and that his medication might include unverified foreign-sourced drugs.

[120] Ha Yuna, "Source: Kim Jong-un Recently Underwent a Cardiovascular Procedure," *Daily NK*, April 21, 2020, https://www.dailynk.com/english/source-kim-jong-un-recently-cardiovascular-operation/.

Kim Jong-un is reportedly plagued by unhealthy lifestyle habits. South Korea's National Intelligence Service assessed that the North Korean leader may be caught in a vicious cycle of stress-induced heavy drinking, nicotine dependence, and worsening insomnia. His obsession with alcohol and cigarettes has been widely documented.

In April 2018, during a dinner with a South Korean delegation in Pyongyang, then-National Security Advisor Chung Eui-yong suggested[121] to Kim that he quit smoking. Kim's wife, Ri Sol-ju, responded with a laugh, saying, "I always ask him to quit, but he never listens." Around the same time, South Korean officials who attended the first inter-Korean summit reported that Kim did not turn down a single glass of alcohol throughout the evening.

Kim's apparent health issues have been visible during major diplomatic events. At the inter-Korean and U.S.–North Korea summits, he was seen panting heavily after walking short distances and gasping for breath once he stopped. During the September 2018 inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang, the two leaders visited Mount Paektu together. While riding a cable car up the mountain, Kim asked President Moon Jae-in, "Aren't you out of breath?" to which Moon replied, "Not at all. This is nothing." Ri Sol-ju then jokingly remarked, "You're really annoying," easing the awkward moment. At the time, Moon was 65 years old and Kim only 34, yet Kim's physical condition appeared markedly worse.

North Korea's official newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, claimed that Kim suffers from insomnia due to his tireless devotion to state affairs. However, the more likely cause appears to be deteriorating health from chronic drinking and smoking. Fueling speculation, Kim was once seen during the bitter North Korean winter wearing a heavy coat but open-toed sandals with holes, raising concerns that he may be dealing with a medical condition.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in his memoir *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for the America I Love*, recounted a striking episode. After a long flight across the Pacific, he finally met with Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang. The meeting lasted several hours but was interrupted roughly every 45 minutes for what was described as an "important phone call." In reality, Pompeo wrote, the calls were code for smoke breaks—summoned not by an aide, but by Marlboro Man himself.

Pompeo also noted that the North Korean side would often cite "translation issues" as a pretext to buy time for Kim to take smoking breaks, revealing just how dependent he was on his habit.

Kim Jong-un's health once again came under scrutiny during the COVID-19 pandemic. People with underlying conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and lung disease—as well as those who are obese or heavy smokers—are known to be at higher risk for infection or severe illness from the coronavirus. Kim appeared to meet nearly all of these high-risk criteria, making him especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

Before the pandemic, Kim averaged over 100 public appearances annually,[122] with the number ranging from a low of 89 to as many as 200 events per year since taking power. However, following the outbreak, his public activities sharply declined: 55 appearances in 2020, 63 in 2021, and 77 in 2022—roughly half the usual number.

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[121] Chosun Ilbo, "정의용, 김정은에 '담배 끊으시죠'… 순간 김영철 표정 굳어" ["Chung Eui-yong to Kim Jong-un: 'Why don't you quit smoking?' … Kim Yong-chol's expression suddenly froze"], April 9, 2018, https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/04/09/2018040900280.html.

[122] Korea Institute for National Unification, *Kim Jong-un's Public Activities Database*, https://www.kinu.or.kr/nksdb.

The number of close aides accompanying him also decreased. In 2013, as many as 102 aides were documented accompanying Kim throughout the year. But in 2020, the number dropped to 55, then slightly increased to 56 in 2021 and 59 in 2022.

Kim could not entirely avoid the virus himself. Between July 9 and 27, he vanished from public view for about 20 days, fueling speculation that he had gone into hiding. It was later reported that Kim had contracted COVID-19 and suffered from a high fever during that period. The infection appears to have impacted his health significantly. State media later showed images of a visibly slimmer Kim, prompting questions about whether he had tried to lose weight in response to a serious health scare. While his weight rebounded in subsequent months, some observers believe the weight loss was a direct consequence of the COVID-19 infection and the threat it posed to his well-being.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were signs that leader Kim Jong-un intentionally reduced his public exposure and delegated more responsibilities to his sister, Kim Yo-jong. Beginning in March 2020, Kim Yo-jong issued 12 official statements[123] under her own name through November 2022, most of which criticized South Korea and the United States. Of those, three were issued on Kim Jong-un's behalf, marking a shift in her political stature.

On June 13, 2020, Kim Yo-jong, first deputy department director of the ruling Workers' Party, issued a strongly worded statement through *KCNA* that hinted at military provocations and the demolition of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong. "I gave instructions to the relevant departments in charge of the enemy affairs to execute the next action," she said, "exercising the power vested in me by the chairman of the State Affairs Commission, the Party and the state." Her remarks confirmed that she had been officially entrusted with authority by Kim Jong-un during the pandemic.

Such a delegation of power is highly unusual in North Korea. Since Kim Il-sung established a one-man rule, no one had been publicly granted such authority. Ultimately, Kim Yo-jong did carry out the destruction of the Kaesong liaison office, and Pyongyang released footage of the explosion. Amid heightened tensions over anti-North Korean leaflets sent by South Korean human rights activists, Kim Yo-jong emerged as a fierce voice against the South, solidifying her presence.

Some observers speculated that First Lady Ri Sol-ju may have opposed the rise of Kim Yo-jong and that this led to the increased public appearances of Kim and Ri's daughter, Kim Ju-ae. However, the more convincing theory suggests that concerns over Kim Jong-un's health prompted efforts to empower Kim Yo-jong and, eventually, introduce Kim Ju-ae as a potential successor.

On July 29, 2024, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) reported during a parliamentary briefing that Kim Jong-un began showing signs of hypertension and diabetes in his early 30s. Without health improvements, hereditary cardiovascular conditions could surface. The agency also detected efforts to source alternative medications abroad, suggesting that current treatments may be insufficient.

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[123] Kim Jong-won (김종원), 북한 김여정 담화 분석 [An Analysis of Kim Yo-jong's Statements in North Korea] (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Security Strategy, December 1, 2022), https://www.inss.re.kr/publication/bbs/js_view.do?nttId=410593&bbsId=js&page=7&searchCnd=100&searchWrd=%EB%B6%81%ED%95%9C.

Renowned neuropsychologist and Trinity College professor Ian Robertson explained[124] that if Kim Ju-ae is indeed being positioned as successor, fear of death may be a driving factor. According to Robertson, narcissistic dictators often see themselves as immortal. As death nears, that illusion cracks — but by installing a dynastic successor, they project their legacy forward, lessening that fear. In North Korea's case, that means building a dynasty in which the ruler's self-image continues through their heir.

Kim Jong-il was reportedly once opposed to hereditary succession, warning that a third-generation transfer of power could become an international joke. Kim Jong-nam also testified that his father had told him multiple times he would not hand power to a son. When early discussions emerged about making Kim Jong-un the successor, Kim Jong-il allegedly became furious and banned further mention. But after suffering a stroke, as his own death loomed, Kim Jong-il rushed to finalize succession plans — with his health crisis appearing to be the key turning point.

To Salute a 10-year-old girl

Andrei Lankov, a Russian expert on North Korea and professor at Kookmin University, analyzed[125] that Kim Ju-ae's frequent presence at military events aims to overcome potential internal resistance within North Korea's leadership in the future. Lankov pointed out that it is especially difficult to overcome the male-dominated mindset in the Korean People's Army. If an adult Kim Ju-ae suddenly emerged as a successor, it could provoke backlash. Therefore, showing a young Kim Ju-ae closely connected to the military helps ease that transition.

Ken Gause, an American expert on North Korean leadership, also assessed[126] that Kim Ju-ae accompanies Kim Jong-un on military inspections to build relationships with military personnel and acquire military knowledge.

Looking at the succession processes of Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, persuading the "People's Army" was the biggest challenge. Kim Il-sung's eldest son, Kim Jong-il, was not initially the heir apparent. He faced a rival: his half-brother Kim Pyong-il, who had a long military career and strong connections within the army, earning their support. Later, Kim Pyong-il was sidelined and posted to overseas diplomatic missions for 30 years, blocking his access to power. This reportedly caused Kim Jong-il, who lacked military experience, to have a complex about the military's support.

Instead, Kim Jong-il built his career in two powerful Workers' Party departments—the Propaganda and Agitation Department, which controls ideology, and the Organization and Guidance Department, which manages personnel and wields significant power. Ultimately, Kim Il-sung endorsed Kim Jong-il, but after assuming power, Kim Jong-il had to constantly court the military's favor. This explains why his regime prioritized military strength and pursued the *songun* policy.

Some analysts link this to orchestrated incidents such as the 1976 Panmunjom axe attack, the 1983 Rangoon bombing, and the 1987 Korean Air bombing, as part of securing the succession.

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[124] Ian Robertson, interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.

[125] Andrei Lankov, "[란코프] 김정은은 왜 어린 딸을 내세웠나" ["[Lankov] Why Did Kim Jong-un Put His Young Daughter Forward?"], *Radio Free Asia (Korean Service)*, November 30, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/korean/commentary/lankov/alcu-11302023103126.html.

[126] In-person interview with Ken Gause, March 2024.

The case of Kim Jong-un was similar. His "currency reform," which he led after being named successor, failed and provoked dissent among the elite, particularly causing losses for the military, which held significant cash reserves. Analysts argue[127] that, to appease the military during ongoing skirmishes in the West Sea, Kim Jong-il allowed the 2010 Cheonan attack. The attack played a crucial role in Kim Jong-un's succession, and the subsequent Yeonpyeong Island shelling seven months later helped solidify his military leadership. Leon Panetta, then CIA director at the time, told *ABC News* that the Cheonan attack was part of succession efforts to win military trust for the young and inexperienced Kim Jong-un. Multiple U.S. officials, cited by The New York Times, also believe Kim Jong Il ordered the attack to secure Kim Jong-un's succession.

Since Kim Ju-ae's public debut, over 70% of her appearances have been at military-related events. As of June 2025, she has appeared 41 times publicly, with 28 of those at military events. She has been present at major occasions such as intercontinental ballistic missile launches, unit inspections, reconnaissance satellite events, two military parades, Navy Day, and Air Force Day.

On November 26, 2022, during her second public appearance, Jang Chang-ha of the National Defense Science Academy, who leads nuclear development, was seen respectfully shaking her hand with both hands, confirming her status. In 2023, Kim Jong-un visited both the Navy and Air Force headquarters, where commanders lined up and greeted him. Kim Ju-ae followed closely behind, exchanging greetings. Navy Commander Kim Myung-sik saluted her and bowed before shaking her hand; Air Force Commander Kim Kwang-hyuk similarly bowed and shook her hand.

A highlight came during the September 9, 2023, 75th anniversary military parade marking North Korea's founding. Pak Jong-chon, marshal of the Korean People's Army and Kim Jong-un's closest military aide, was seen kneeling before Kim Ju-ae, saluting, and whispering to her. Pak Jong-chon is one of the most politically volatile figures of the Kim Jong-un era, and his act of kneeling and saluting before Kim Ju-ae carries deep symbolic significance.

At the start of Kim's rule, Pak held the rank of lieutenant general. He was soon promoted to colonel general, but later demoted multiple times[128]—first back to lieutenant general, then to major general, and at one point reportedly to the rank of colonel. In 2016, he reappeared in public as a lieutenant general, only to be demoted again to major general within six months. His military career has been marked by an unusual pattern of rapid promotions and demotions.

Despite these setbacks, Pak eventually rose to become chief of the General Staff and, in 2020, was elevated to the rank of marshal — the highest possible military rank in the Korean People's Army. This erratic pattern of promotions and demotions is widely interpreted as evidence of his political resilience and survival instincts amid fierce internal power struggles.

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[127] Ken E. Gause, *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics under Kim Jong-un* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2015).

[128] Jeon Jeong-hwan (전정환), Song Bong-seon (송봉선), Lee Young-jin (이영진), and Seo Yu-seok (서유석), *김정은 시대의 북한인물 따라가보기, 2018* [Tracing North Korean Figures in the Kim Jong-un Era, 2018] (Seonin (선인), 2018), https://www.kinu.or.kr/library/10130/contents/6491268.

His decision to kneel before Kim Ju-ae—following his past display of deference to Kim Jong-un—is widely viewed as a calculated political gesture, demonstrating Pak's acute understanding of power dynamics in Pyongyang. The move also suggests that he is aligning himself with a possible future leader.

Pak has since reemerged as one of Kim Jong-un's closest confidants, reportedly eclipsing Jo Yong-won—the ruling party secretary once dubbed "Kim's shadow"—as Kim's most trusted aide.

The South Korean government has cited[129] such developments as further evidence that Kim Ju-ae is undergoing a carefully managed succession grooming process.

Chapter 7 — The Hidden Son and Gender Barriers

Rumors of a Son

In the globally popular fantasy novel *Harry Potter*, characters dare not utter the name of the villain Voldemort. Instead, they refer to him as "He Who Shall Not Be Named," fearing that merely speaking his name could invite a curse or expose their location. This fictional taboo closely mirrors reality in one of the world's most secretive societies: North Korea.

In April 2025, during the Pyongyang International Marathon—the first held in six years—a British YouTuber captured a conversation with a local guide. When asked what he wanted to show foreign visitors, the guide declared, "We have a great leader," reaffirming loyalty to Kim Jong-un. But when the YouTuber asked, "Does Kim Jong-un have a daughter?" the guide answered yes. However, when pressed with, "Do you think she will be the next leader?" he hesitated, looked visibly uneasy, and replied, "I don't know."

The scene offers a rare, candid glimpse into the reality of taboo and surveillance in North Korea. Discussion of the personal lives of the Kim family—including Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un—is strictly forbidden. Violations can be deadly. The regime enforces total control through deification of its leader and surveillance of its citizens. Anecdotes abound of people who vanished after merely discussing the ruling family. Yet even the harshest censorship cannot prevent whispers from escaping. Secrets, once known, tend to spread.

Historically, North Korea mirrored Confucian traditions such as the principle of primogeniture—passing leadership to the eldest son. That norm broke when Kim Jong-un was chosen as successor over his elder brothers, Kim Jong-nam and Kim Jong-chol. However, male succession remained intact. Following the public emergence of Kim Ju-ae, attention turned to whether Kim Jong-un has a son. Could it be that no son exists?

In 2017, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) assessed that Kim had three children: a firstborn son (born 2010), a daughter (believed to be Kim Ju-ae, born 2013), and a third child of unknown gender born

[129] Unification Ministry, high-level official background briefing, December 2023.

in 2017. The NIS cited signs such as luxury boys' toys being urgently imported in 2010, reportedly by high-level directive.[130]

Consider the timeline of Ri Sol-ju's childbirth. Believed to have married Kim in 2009, Ri made her first public appearance in July 2012, during a Moranbong Band performance. Unlike Kim Jong-il, who never revealed his wife, Kim Jong-un publicly introduced Ri. Yet reports that Ri had a child in 2010 conflict with her frequent stage performances that year.[131] She appeared multiple times in official concerts as part of renowned ensembles like the *Unhasu Orchestra*. It's difficult to reconcile those appearances with the demands of pregnancy or postpartum recovery.

While traditional Korean customs emphasize postpartum care, Ri's apparent activities on stage soon after giving birth raise questions. North Korea officially offers 180 days of maternity leave, and as the wife of the Supreme Leader, Ri would be expected to receive even more care. According to Han Seo-hee,[132] a defector and former vocalist with the People's Security Ministry ensemble, ordinary performers often rehearsed and performed until late pregnancy, but even then, it was rare to return immediately after giving birth. If Ri was indeed pregnant in 2010, she would have likely been withdrawn from the public eye for an extended period.

Adding complexity, some reports challenge the official marriage date. While the NIS claims the couple married in 2009, a defector formerly in a high-ranking position in Pyongyang said Ri was still a university student then, making marriage unlikely. Others speculate the marriage occurred in 2011. Supporting this theory is the fact that Ri disappeared from stage performances around that time. In conservative North Korean society, premarital pregnancy is socially unacceptable, casting further doubt on claims about a 2010 son.

In contrast, Ri's pregnancy with Kim Ju-ae appears well-documented. Ju-ae is believed to have been born in February 2013. Rumors of Ri's pregnancy surfaced in late 2012 based on her appearance, and although initially dismissed as gossip, Dennis Rodman later confirmed that Kim told him in early 2013 that he had a daughter. Rodman even said he held the infant during a September 2013 visit. Korean media[133] had speculated Ri was seven months pregnant in December 2012. Ri also disappeared from public events during this period, aligning with typical maternity patterns.

Similar patterns occurred in 2017. Ri did not attend the December 17[134] memorial marking the fifth anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death. Nor did she appear during major events in February 2017. By July, Korean media noted she had been absent for four consecutive months, consistent with a third childbirth. Though not confirmed by multiple sources, one South Korean official familiar with inter-Korean affairs said[135] that Ju-ae is the first child, and the second child—born in 2017—is a son. Pro-North Korean figures in China reportedly even sent congratulatory gifts.

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[130] Kang Tae-hwa (강태화), "[단독] '김정은 장남 미스터리…관저 들어간 이 장난감서 시작' [Exclusive: 'The Mystery of Kim Jong-un's Eldest Son… It All Began with This Toy Brought into the Residence']," JoongAng Ilbo (중앙일보), March 9, 2023, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25146077.

[131] Information Center on North Korea.

[132] Han Seo-hee, phone interview by Jaewoo Park, July 2024.

[133] Ahn Jeong-sik (안정식), "만삭인 리설주의 배가 갑자기 들어갔다? ['Ri Sol-ju's Pregnant Belly Suddenly Disappeared?']," Pressian (프레시안), April 27, 2014, https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/5640.

[134] O Ji-ye, "넉 달째 두문불출 리설주…또다시 임신설" ["Ri Sol-ju Absent for Four Months…Pregnancy Rumors Resurface"], *MBN*, July 10, 2017, https://www.mbn.co.kr/news/politics/3277713.

[135] Interview with anonymous source, February 2024.

Rumors persist that the supposed firstborn son is a myth. Some suggest Kim fathered a child out of wedlock, possibly with Hyon Song-wol, who allegedly gave birth at Pyongyang Maternity Hospital and whose child was spirited away by the Organization and Guidance Department. These sources draw parallels to the sidelining of Kim Jong-nam, whose mother Sung Hye-rim lacked political clout, compared to Ko Yong-hui, mother of Kim Jong-un.

Yet rumors around Hyon Song-wol have often been false. Reports once claimed she was executed for pornography in 2013, only for her to reappear in 2015 and again in 2018 as head of the Samjiyon Orchestra, leading delegations to Beijing and South Korea during diplomatic outreach.

Foreigners close to Kim after his rise to power in 2011 say they saw no evidence of a son. Joao Micaelo, Kim's Swiss schoolmate, told me[136] he visited North Korea in 2012 and 2013 at Kim's invitation. "He told me his wife was pregnant in 2012, and later that they had a daughter," Micaelo said. "I never heard anything about a son."

Dennis Rodman visited North Korea five times between 2013 and 2017. During a September 2013 trip to Kim's Wonsan villa, Rodman and his manager, Chris Volo, met the family, including Kim Ju-ae. Neither reported[137] seeing any boys.

"There were other family members, but no little boys," Rodman said.

"No signs of a son. The baby, his daughter, was so young she couldn't even crawl yet," Volo added.

Also present were Kim's sister Kim Yo-jong, his brother Kim Jong-chol, and even half-sister Kim Sul-song—none of whom had appeared in media reports about the visit. This suggests the entire family was introduced to the American guest. If a son existed, hiding him while showcasing Ju-ae seems unlikely.

One North Korea analyst remarked: "If Kim had a son older than Ju-ae and still paraded Ju-ae around publicly, that would be bizarre. If there is a son, he may not be healthy."[138]

During the 2018 inter-Korean summit, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said Kim confided to him that he had a daughter and expressed a desire for denuclearization:

"He told me he has a daughter and doesn't want her generation to live under the threat of nuclear weapons."

No mention was made of a son. When I asked[139] former U.S. officials like John Bolton and Steve Biegun—both key figures in the Trump-era negotiations with Kim—they confirmed that family matters never came up in talks.

Rodman and Micaelo may have heard about Kim's daughter because in 2012 and 2013, Kim was newly in power, freed from the shadow of his father. He might have shared more openly, without the calculated secrecy

[136] Park Jaewoo, "Childhood Friend of North Korea's Kim Jong-un Says He Has Never Heard about Kim's Son," *Radio Free Asia (English Service)*, May 26, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/son-05262023161429.html.
[137] In-person interview with Dennis Rodman, April 2025; phone interview with Chris Volo, May 2023.
[138] Cho Han Beom, interview at YTN, January 2024.
[139] Interview by Jaewoo Park, July 2024.

he adopted later. The idea that he was deliberately hiding a son while showcasing his daughter seems implausible.

Moon's 2024 memoir suggests the same. If a son existed, Kim likely would have mentioned him instead of his daughter.

Some analysts argue that a woman is more likely to inherit power in a bloodline-based dynasty. Former Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun, who interacted with top North Korean officials during progressive administrations, said:[140] "They emphasize Paektu bloodline, so the successor must be from Kim's children. If they can't use a son, they will have no choice but to appoint a daughter." And "In a system where bloodline is everything, competence may come second to heredity. If Kim Ju-ae is indeed the smartest of the three, she may be North Korea's next ruler." He added.

Women and Patriarchy in North Korea

North Korea is deeply rooted in Confucian patriarchal values, which severely limit women's ability to realize their individual potential. Particularly in politics and power structures, women face towering barriers. From 1945 to 2000, out of 260 Cabinet members, only around six were women.[141] According to the Council on Foreign Relations' *Women's Power Index* released in 2024, women make up just 17% of the Cabinet and 18% of the Supreme People's Assembly. Of the 61 minister-level positions, only one—Choe Son-hui—was held by a woman, and out of the 687 Assembly seats, only about 120 were occupied by women.

One of the highest expressions of political authority in North Korea is the Party Congress—an event akin to combining South Korea's legislative and presidential elections—usually held every five years. At the 8th Party Congress, the most recent, of 5,000 delegates, 4,499 were men and only 501 were women.

Kang Ji-hyun, a North Korean defector who now runs a fashion business in South Korea, left the country because she could not pursue her dreams as a woman.[142] Ji-hyun became interested in fashion at age 15 during a trip to Mount Paektu with her father, a former Party official. She saw a foreign tourist wearing ripped jeans—initially thinking he was a beggar. Only later did she learn this was fashion. Enthralled, she began wearing jeans and trying out styles in her hometown of Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province. But instead of encouragement, she faced public scorn. Her father, humiliated by gossip that he failed to discipline his daughter, physically abused her—a trauma she still carries.

> "*My dad used to check my clothes every time I went out. He would say, 'What are you wearing this time?' But since he went to work early and came home late, he didn't really know what I wore during the day. He heard things from others, and I think it stressed him out. One day, he hit me. Then he cried. I think he felt sorry. I hadn't even done anything bad—except dress differently.*"

North Korea wasn't a place where girls could dream. Instead of expressing personal aspirations, women were expected to stay quiet and fulfill their role as obedient daughters.

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[140] *Kim Hyun-jung's News Show*, CBS, September 2023.
[141] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[142] Kang Ji-hyun, in-person interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.

In North Korea's feudal-style society, gender discrimination is structural. According to Ji-hyun, girls rarely aspired to become Party officials. A few talked about military service, but most hoped to become teachers. Although jobs are assigned by the Workers' Party once citizens become adults, factors like family background, bribery, and power still play a crucial role.

According to Lee So-yeon,[143] a former female soldier in the Korean People's Army, many young women enlist hoping to become Party members or gain social advantage—but the reality is grim. Sexual harassment and unwanted physical contact from male officers are widespread. Unless a woman has powerful relatives in the military, she is likely to face such abuse. Some even suffer sexual assault. Yet when victims are punished for "disrupting military discipline" and dishonorably discharged, perpetrators are merely reassigned. Human rights violations against women in the military are severe, and awareness of the issue remains low.

Lee So-yeon believes such a patriarchal military system makes it unlikely that a woman could ever become Supreme Commander. Few women in the military rise above the rank of colonel. The only known woman promoted to general in North Korean history was Jeon Gugang, director of Military Hospital No. 46, who served as a nurse during the Korean War. Otherwise, high-ranking female military officials are virtually nonexistent. That's why some experts argue that even if Kim Ju-ae is named successor, she may never actually become Supreme Leader unless there's a fundamental change in gender norms.[144]

However, South Korea's state-run Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) suggests change is slowly emerging. Based on interviews with recent defectors and analyses of North Korean literature, KINU reports[145] that although far from gender equality, women's roles are expanding, challenging the country's rigid patriarchy. One key factor is North Korea's declining birthrate. According to the *UN ESCAP's 2024 Asia-Pacific Population Report*, the country's total fertility rate fell to 1.8 in 2024.

"A comprehensive analysis of North Korea's state-led patriarchal discourse, changes in family life, and women's rising roles suggests that the emergence of a female Supreme Leader as a fourth-generation successor to Kim Jong-un is possible."

"Given the country's increasing societal acceptance of women's empowerment, we can reasonably estimate that the conditions for a female leader—like Kim Ju-ae—to emerge are being established." – The Everyday Lives of North Koreans: Between State Planning and Family Independence, March 2024

A major driver of these changes is the rise of the *jangmadang* (informal markets), where women have become key players. While men remain tied to military and organizational duties, women dominate the market economy. Since the collapse of the public distribution system in the 1990s, the government has failed to provide for citizens, allowing market activity to flourish. As a result, women are often the primary breadwinners.

Many of North Korea's *donju* ("new wealthy class": 돈주), money changers, and wholesalers are women. They monitor global trends and market information. Some even travel to China—legally and illegally—for work in restaurants or factories. Testimonies from defectors between 2016 and 2020 show this market-driven shift has reshaped family dynamics. About 30% said women's status had become equal to or higher than their husbands', while 45.9% said it had "somewhat improved." In some households, women mock their husbands as "dogs"

[143] Lee So-yeon, virtual interview by Jaewoo Park, September 2024.
[144] Rachel Minyoung Lee, interview by Jaewoo Park, March 2024.
[145] Ministry of Unification, *Perception Report on the Realities of North Korea's Economy and Society* (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2024).

or "daytime light bulbs"—a sarcastic metaphor for something useless during daylight, reflecting shifting power dynamics at home.

Under Kim Jong-un's leadership, signs of change have appeared. Choe Son-hui was appointed foreign minister, and in July 2024, a woman was named to head a key department in the Workers' Party—an extremely rare move. Previously, only a few women, like Kim Jong-il's sister Kim Kyong-hui, ever held such high positions. Some experts speculate these moves may be laying the groundwork for elevating Kim Ju-ae.[146]

Michael Madden, a researcher at the Stimson Center who specializes in North Korean leadership, reported[147] that before Kim Ju-ae's public debut, Kim Jong-un expressed concern multiple times that there were not enough women in leadership. At one meeting, he reportedly lamented: "We do not have enough women in leadership roles."

The Role of Women in the Paektu Bloodline

"All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others." — Animal Farm, George Orwell

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* vividly illustrates how the "four-legged" animals, once in power, exploit the name of "equality" to justify a new form of inequality, oppressing the "two-legged" animals. The idea that "we are different and superior" based on something as arbitrary as the number of legs mirrored the socio-political reality of the Soviet Union at the time, resonating deeply with readers. The farm, founded on the ideals of socialist revolution, gradually became monopolized by a small group of "privileged animals," and the founding principle of "equality for all" was reduced to an empty slogan.

The same is true in North Korea. Officially a socialist-communist state, North Korea claims all its citizens are equal. The Workers' Party of Korea insists that there is no class system in the country and that the people are guaranteed freedom and rights. But the reality is starkly different. For effective social control, the regime has long classified citizens by *songbun*, or social origin, and stratified them into core, wavering, and hostile classes—reportedly divided into as many as 51 categories.[148] This class system traces back to the anti-Japanese armed struggle and remains entrenched even after nearly a century. According to *History of the Korean People's Liberation Struggle*, published in North Korea, the proletarian class gained political significance by entering the stage of the national liberation movement. This laid the foundation for a thoroughly class-based society.[149]

Those deemed lowest in the hierarchy include pro-Japanese collaborators, POWs, repatriated Koreans from Japan, and "hostile" families such as defectors or those discontent with the regime. The middle class includes most ordinary North Koreans—workers, clerks, and rank-and-file party members. Above them stand the elite, including descendants of anti-Japanese partisans who fought alongside Kim Il-sung—the so-called "Paektu

[146] Jung Sung-jang, interview by Jaewoo Park.
[147] Michael Madden, phone interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2025.
[148] Ministry of Unification (통일부), *통일백서 [Unification White Paper]*, August 25, 2023, https://unikorea.go.kr/books/archive/archive/?boardId=bbs_0000000000000043&mode=view&searchCondition=all&searchKeyword=&cntId=47385&category=&pageIdx=.
[149] Seo, Jae-jin (서재진). *김일성 항일무장투쟁의 신화화 연구* [Study on the Mythologization of Kim Il-sung's Anti-Japanese Armed Struggle]. Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2006.

bloodline." These individuals occupy powerful positions in society, but even they fall short of the ultimate ruling class: Kim Il-sung's direct family.

In North Korea, where gender discrimination is pervasive, class status can even override gender barriers. While many female members of the Paektu lineage remain shrouded in secrecy, a few have been given almost royal treatment.

Kim Jong-suk, Kim Il-sung's first official wife, fought alongside him during the Japanese occupation. She died young in 1949 at age 32. Though little was known about her during her life, she was posthumously mythologized as a revolutionary comrade of Kim Il-sung, especially after Kim Jong-il was designated successor. She was celebrated as the "General of Mt. Paektu" and became the first woman to be idolized and elevated to a leadership rank. A county in Ryanggang Province was renamed "Kim Jong-suk County," and institutions such as the Kim Jong-suk Naval University and Teachers' College were established in her name.

Next came Kim Kyong-hui, the first "princess" of the Paektu bloodline. The daughter of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-suk and younger sister of Kim Jong-il, she played key roles in the Workers' Party, serving as deputy director of the International Department from 1976 and as head of the Light Industry Department from 1987. After Kim Jong-il collapsed in 2008, she was appointed as Kim Jong-un's unofficial guardian, eventually becoming a full Politburo member and general of the Korean People's Army. In 2012, she was made secretary of the WPK Central Committee. Kim Jong-il trusted her deeply, once saying, "Kim Kyong-hui is me. Her words are my words. Her instructions are my instructions."[150]

However, after her husband Jang Song-thaek was executed for allegedly plotting a coup, Kim Kyong-hui disappeared. Rumors of her execution circulated, but she reappeared about a decade later—signaling that even Kim Jong-un dared not touch a senior member of the Paektu bloodline.

Compared to Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Yo-jong holds a lower formal rank but wields far more political influence. Kim Jong-il kept Kim Kyong-hui from being assigned to core departments like the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) or Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD), whereas Kim Yo-jong has played an active role from the outset. During the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, she traveled to South Korea as part of a peace delegation with Kim Yong-nam, the North's nominal head of state. Notably, Kim Yong-nam deferred to her during protocol discussions, attempting to offer her the seat of honor. Despite being much younger and junior in rank, this act reflected Kim Yo-jong's high status within the regime.

There have been claims that people surround Kim Kyong-hui and Kim Yo-jong hoping for social advancement through their connections. Their status has led to speculation that they could be chosen as successors—particularly during times of health concerns about Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un.

Kim Jong-un's decision to appoint Choe Son-hui, the daughter of a partisan family, as foreign minister is also striking. Despite not having a military background, Choe drew attention when she broke a champagne bottle at the launching ceremony for the tactical nuclear submarine *Hero Kim Kun Ok*—a role typically reserved for

[150] Chico Harlan, "Kim Keeping Power in the Family," *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2010, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/national/2010/09/29/kim-keeping-power-in-the-family/35757f8e-cb6d-11df-8eee-2e1a26a3708e.

the regime's elite.[151] She has also been spotted with luxury handbags at official events, a privilege previously reserved for Kim Jong-un's wife Ri Sol-ju or female members of the Paektu lineage.

Compared to his predecessors, Kim Jong-un appears more open to empowering women. Some even call him a "feminist" leader, citing his emotional leadership style. According to Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-un had difficulty adapting during his youth in Switzerland and found solace in female North Korean orchestra members. This may explain his ease in promoting women and even considering female successors.

"Women from North Korea's famous Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble and the Wangjaesan Light Music Band—known for the 'Pleasure Squad'—visited Switzerland and acted as friends to his younger siblings." — My Father, Kim Jong-il, and I, Book by Yōji Gomi

Kim Jong-il had children beyond Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-chol, Kim Jong-un, and Kim Yo-jong. One lesser-known daughter, Kim Sul-song, born to his official wife Kim Young-sook, was reportedly the favorite of both Kim Jong-il and his father Kim Il-sung. Michael Madden, a North Korea researcher at the Stimson Center, describes[152] her as a shadowy figure with backstage influence. Though rarely mentioned in state media, Kim Il-sung was said to have named her himself—the only granddaughter he publicly acknowledged.

Until 2007, Kim Jong-il reportedly considered Kim Sul-song his preferred successor. During his 24-day train trip across Russia in 2001, Kim confided to Russian official Konstantin Pulikovsky: "My sons are lazy and dull. But my daughters have political sense and talent." He singled out Sul Song, saying, "I love this daughter, and I consider her a candidate for succession."[153]

According to *SisaIN,*[154] when Park Geun-hye—South Korea's first female president—visited Pyongyang in May 2002 as a lawmaker, Kim Sul-song attended the meeting between Park and Kim Jong-il. It was said that Kim Jong-il wanted to show Park to Sul-song as a role model for a future female leader. On May 13, 2002, Kim Sul-song appeared in a dress at the Baekhwawon Guesthouse, seated in the background of their evening meeting.

Park Geun-hye, as the daughter of authoritarian president Park Chung-hee, carried symbolic weight as a former first lady figure following her mother's assassination. North Korea, also an authoritarian state, may have seen in her a parallel to shape its own female successor. Notably, Kim Ju-ae now appears prominently in official events traditionally reserved for Ri Sol-ju, suggesting she may be positioned similarly to Park in South Korea's past.

There are also reports that Kim Jong-il dictated his will to Kim Sul-song shortly before his death, expressing disappointment in Kim Jong-un and hope in Sul-song. According to North Korean defector Lee Yoon-geol, who claims to have obtained Kim Jong-il's will, Sul-song passed it to Kim Kyong-hui, who carried out its contents. If true, it highlights Kim Sul-song's centrality in her father's eyes.

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[151] The Hero Kim Kun Ok is a Sinpo-C class submarine. 'Nuclear' refers to its supposed armament, and not to the propulsion system.
[152] Michael Madden, phone interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2025.
[153] Konstantin Pulikovsky, *Orient Express to the East* (2003).
[154] Nam Mun-hee, "김정일 위원장이 초지일관 사랑했던 김설송" ["Kim Jong-il's Unwaveringly Beloved Kim Sul-song"], *SisaIN*, March 5, 2025, https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=16072.

Despite this, Kim Sul-song never became successor and now holds no official role in North Korea, unlike Kim Kyong-hui and Kim Yo-jong. All three women are direct descendants of the Kim dynasty, but their political roles have varied widely. Kim Sul-song remained in the background, reportedly serving as Kim Jong-il's personal secretary but never holding any party or military positions. In contrast, Kim Kyong-hui played a key role in party affairs, while Kim Yo-jong has become one of Kim Jong-un's closest and most visible aides, especially in foreign policy and propaganda.

In conclusion, although Kim Jong-il hoped to raise Kim Sul-song as a female successor, societal conditions in North Korea may not have allowed it. As discussions around Kim Ju-ae continue, Sul-song's story offers important insight. Her absence from power may reflect the regime's enduring gender biases, despite elite bloodlines. Understanding why Kim Sul-song was ultimately sidelined could shed light on whether North Korea is truly ready for a female leader. For now, however, much remains unknown.

The Rise of a Female Dictator?

Despite the ongoing debate about Kim Ju-ae's succession, experts say gender is not an issue when it comes to North Korea's leadership succession. They analyze that ultimately, it depends solely on the supreme leader Kim Jong-un's decision.

Tae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat at the embassy in the UK who later defected and served as a South Korean lawmaker and vice chairman of the National Unification Advisory Council, said[155] that before Kim Ju-ae's emergence, the prevailing view inside North Korea was that a woman could not become the supreme leader. The belief that only men could lead was strong. However, Tae said that watching Kim Ju-ae's activities after her appearance suggested a move with succession in mind. "If Kim Jong-un decides, anything is possible in the current system," he said.

Lee Yong-seok, former deputy director of the CIA's Korea Mission Center, noted[156] that historically, the Korean Peninsula had female rulers such as Queen Seondeok, Queen Jindeok, and Queen Jinseong during the Silla Dynasty, so the public acceptance of a female leader would not be difficult. He also referenced South Korea's election of Park Geun-hye as its 11th president, highlighting cultural commonalities despite North Korea being a hostile state. Lee said he was not yet certain Kim Ju-ae was the successor, but saw no obstacle to a woman becoming leader.

Frank Jannuzi, president of the Mansfield Foundation, who visited North Korea in 2004 with nuclear expert Dr. Siegfried Hecker and met North Korea's current foreign minister Choe Son-hui—then director of the Foreign Ministry's Americas Department—said[157] he saw great potential in her from their first meeting. He attributed her confidence to her political background, coming from a family with partisan roots including her adoptive father Choe Yong-rim and uncles. Jannuzi recalled that during Choe Son-hui's 2018 visit to New York, as deputy foreign minister, she acted as a de facto power broker, freely engaging with U.S. counterparts ahead of foreign minister Kim Yong-chol. From this, Jannuzi concluded that bloodline matters more than gender in

[155] Tae Yong-ho, in-person interview by Jaewoo Park, November 2023.
[156] Lee Yong-seok, virtual interview by Jaewoo Park, October 2023.
[157] Frank Jannuzi, in-person interview by Jaewoo Park, October 2024.

North Korean politics. He judged it premature to say Kim Ju-ae would be the successor but said female leadership was possible in North Korea based on his experience.

North Korea's constitution and the "10 Principles for the Establishment of the Party's Unitary Leadership System," which justify the three-generation Kim family succession by emphasizing "the bloodline of Paektu Mountain," do not explicitly prohibit a female leader.

"Our Party and revolution's lifeline must be carried forward forever by the bloodline of Paektu, continuously inheriting and developing the Juche revolutionary tradition, while thoroughly preserving its purity,"
—Article 10, Paragraph 2, "10 Principles for the Establishment of the Party's Unitary Leadership System"

Historically, female autocrats like England's Queen Elizabeth I and Russia's Catherine the Great existed, but no female dictators have emerged in modern times, especially in communist states. The scarcity of female dictators is attributed to the brutal, ruthless "Machiavellian" leadership environment. Neuropsychological studies show female leaders tend to be kinder and gentler than males, possibly due to genetic maternal instincts, making them less likely to be dictators. Men are generally more ruthless, aggressive, and dominant.[158]

Even if a woman takes power in a country like North Korea, experts predict little will change. Female leaders would likely adopt similar traits. Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister, has publicly demonstrated this: her statements are often harsher than her brother's. While Kim Ju-ae may face limits modeling herself after previous leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, if she becomes leader, she is expected to rule as a dictator modeled on Kim Jong-un. The main difference would be the elevated status of women in North Korea.

Reports indicate North Korea's younger generation increasingly opposes the fourth-generation succession. This cohort is skeptical of Kim Jong-un's leadership and the regime, prompting sensitive responses from North Korean authorities. If the fourth-generation leadership does not present a more modern, sophisticated image, regime survival may face serious challenges.

In response, the Kim regime may be considering the "first female leader" card. If Kim Ju-ae rises as successor, she would become the world's first female communist leader and add a new "refined" image to the North Korean regime. This can be seen as an attempt to modernize and soften the traditional communist leadership image.

However, it is unclear how effective this would be among North Korea's youth, especially the so-called "*jangmadang* generation." This group, born after the collapse of the socialist rationing system in the 1990s, grew up with market-driven capitalist activities. They feel they have received little from the government and show relatively weak loyalty. Having not experienced the socialist distribution system, ideological propaganda and loyalty demands have little impact on them.

Therefore, skepticism remains about whether a new leader like Kim Ju-ae or a "refined image" strategy would boost their loyalty. Instead, distrust in the state and desire for the outside world may grow.

[158] Ian Robertson and Frederick Coolidge, video interview by Jaewoo Park, February 2024.

Chapter 8 — Three Scenarios After Kim Jong-un

Scenario One: A Stable Transition of Power

Among those who research or report on North Korea, a familiar joke circulates: forecasting the country's future is like a blind man touching an elephant. Even in environments where information is abundant, predicting the future is difficult. In North Korea, where access to reliable information is exceptionally restricted, the challenge grows exponentially.

Analysts primarily rely on changes in North Korean state media—*Rodong Sinmun*, *KCNA*, and *Korean Central Television*—as well as testimonies from defectors. But these sources often contradict each other, making it nearly impossible to verify key facts with certainty.

Public sentiment toward North Korea in South Korea also swings drastically with changes in government. Under liberal administrations, reconciliation seems within reach, even making unification appear imminent. But under conservative leadership, escalating tension makes war feel like it could break out at any moment. When a high-ranking defector appears in the media, speculation flares that the regime's collapse is near. In such an environment, North Korea analysts are said to survive by offering cautious assessments without crossing red lines.

Still, preparing for a foreseeable future can offer a valuable moment for reflection. If we dare to look beyond the metaphorical elephant, there are roughly three possible scenarios that come to mind.

In this first scenario, Kim Jong-un maintains relative stability and lives into his mid-50s before dying. Concerns about his health have surfaced repeatedly. Observers note his heavy drinking, irregular eating habits, and late-night work schedule—all reminiscent of his father, Kim Jong-il, who died at 69. Yet Kim Jong-un's outward physical condition appears worse, leading many to believe that while he may survive several more years, his lifestyle likely shortens his life expectancy.

Fast forward to the year 2040. *Korean Central Television* (*KCTV*) interrupts its programming with a special broadcast. Wearing black mourning attire, a male anchor delivers the news through muffled sobs: Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un has died. With restrained emotion, he attributes Kim's death to "overwork." Official reports say Kim remained at his desk until the early hours despite deteriorating health. State media claims he died of heart failure, but intelligence sources in South Korea and the United States believe it was a combination of chronic illnesses and complications—not overwork—that caused his death. In his 40s, Kim had reportedly suffered from multiple adult-onset diseases, and public sightings had sharply decreased in his final months, fueling rumors about his health.

Footage of grieving citizens floods the global news agencies via *AP* and *Reuters*. In South Korea, analysts point to Kim Ju-ae, now an adult, as the likely successor. Since becoming an alternate member of the Workers' Party Politburo in 2032 and later advancing to the Presidium in 2035, her role had expanded. By 2038, she had become the First Secretary of the Workers' Party—a clear signal of succession.

Just hours later, South Korea's news agency Yonhap News issues a breaking alert: North Korea has formed a state funeral committee. The 200-member list includes high-profile officials across the party, government, and military, including Kim Yo-jong, Pak Jong-chon, Choe Ryong-hae, Pak Tae-song, Jo Yong-won, and Choe Son-

hui. Notably, Kim Ju-ae is named chair of the committee, marking her formal acknowledgment as the new leader—even within the regime.

North Korea announces a 12-day mourning period. In response, South Korea raises its military alertness to counter potential provocations. Under close consultation with the United States, surveillance and reconnaissance operations are increased. Domestically, a fierce debate erupts over whether the South Korean government should send condolences. Progressives argue that offering condolences could serve as a path to peace and open a channel for information, while conservatives fiercely oppose honoring a dictator responsible for oppressing 20 million people. Ultimately, Seoul decides against sending any message of condolence.

Eleven days after Kim Jong-un's death, North Korea holds a state funeral—officially called a "farewell ceremony." Tens of thousands of citizens line the streets of Pyongyang, bowing their heads in grief. The procession winds through major roads, led by a giant portrait of the late leader, followed by a hearse and vehicles carrying top officials. His casket, decorated in white flowers and red party flags, moves solemnly through the capital.

At 10 a.m., Korean Central Television begins live coverage of the farewell procession. Cameras show Kim Ju-ae walking behind the hearse, her expression solemn and composed.

The procession begins at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are also entombed. It circles Kim Il-sung Square, where citizens bid a tearful final goodbye, then returns to the palace by 5 p.m. Large red-lettered banners hang across Pyongyang, while residents sob openly. *KCNA* reports that "the cries of the people pleading, 'Dear General, please don't leave us,' echoed across the sky."

Eventually, Kim Jong-un's body is placed inside the Kumsusan mausoleum alongside his grandfather and father. As with his predecessors, Kim's body is embalmed for permanent preservation. Both Kim Il-sung, who died in 1994, and Kim Jong-il, who died in 2011, are believed to have been embalmed by Russian experts. These same techniques were reportedly used for leaders such as Vladimir Lenin and Ho Chi Minh.

In 2016, Russia revealed that maintaining Lenin's body cost roughly $200,000 per year. Kim Il-sung's embalming reportedly cost $1 million at the time, and annual maintenance was estimated at around $800,000. Throughout the mourning period, mourners flock to Mansudae Hill and various statues and monuments dedicated to the ruling family. Foreign journalists are strictly barred from covering the funeral, and the regime releases only limited images through *Rodong Sinmun*, *KCNA*, and state TV.

Though Pyongyang's streets overflow with weeping citizens, the authenticity of their grief is questioned. Defectors recall that when Kim Il-sung died, many people genuinely mourned due to deep indoctrination. But by the time of Kim Jong-il's death, the economic collapse and disillusionment led many to fake tears for the cameras. As for Kim Jong-un's death, it remains unclear how many would express genuine sorrow for a third-generation hereditary ruler—let alone a fourth.

As the mourning period ends, Korean Central Television declares:

"No force on Earth can halt the revolutionary march of our Party, military, and people under the leadership of the great Comrade Kim Ju-ae."

With that announcement, the regime formally confirms the succession of Kim Ju-ae.

Global media focus quickly turns to the young woman at the center of the world's most opaque power transition. Parallels are drawn to earlier periods: when Kim Jong-il took power after Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, and when Kim Jong-un emerged in 2011 following Kim Jong-il's death. Each time, skepticism surrounded the successor's readiness, but the regime's grip remained unshaken.

Reports in South Korean media suggest Kim Yo-jong, Kim Ju-ae's aunt, is acting as a regent figure behind the scenes—much like how Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-thaek were rumored to support Kim Jong-un in his early days. Analysts propose that Kim Yo-jong is orchestrating state affairs while her niece consolidates symbolic authority.

Notably, no major purges follow Kim Ju-ae's rise. Senior officials who served under Kim Jong-un continue to appear in public alongside her. Experts interpret this as a sign of controlled continuity. Unlike her father's reign, which began with high-profile executions, Kim Ju-ae's approach is seen as more cautious—at least for now.

She assumes the title of First Secretary, while bestowing upon her father the posthumous honorific "Eternal Leader." While Kim Ju-ae becomes the de facto head of state, it is clear that the regime is treading carefully.

A few months into her leadership, Kim Yo-jong is reassigned as ambassador to a country in Eastern Europe. Analysts read this as the start of an inevitable process. In authoritarian systems, new leaders must eventually build their own power base. Overreliance on senior aides from the previous regime poses a threat to their autonomy. The removal of Kim Yo-jong, though seemingly diplomatic, is interpreted as part of a broader purge—a pattern familiar in North Korea's dynastic history.

Outside the country, some cautiously hope that Kim Ju-ae's leadership might bring a new era, perhaps even hinting at reform. As the first female ruler of North Korea, she breaks precedent. But those who know the system warn against wishful thinking. Gender alone offers little grounds for optimism in a state built on surveillance, control, and militarism.

Meanwhile, North Korean defectors in South Korea seize the moment to ramp up human rights activism. Declaring that a fourth-generation dictatorship cannot be tolerated, they launch balloon campaigns and send leaflets across the border. But unlike past provocations, Pyongyang remains silent—offering no threats or condemnation in return.

Despite the smooth optics of succession, fundamental questions persist. Does Kim Ju-ae truly wield power, or is she a carefully managed figurehead? Will internal consolidation lead to renewed purges? Can she maintain loyalty from the powerful Korean People's Army?

The world watches, once again, as North Korea begins a new chapter in the same dynastic book.

Scenario Two: Kim Ju-ae: North Korea's Tragic Heiress

"What could be worse than communism? What comes after it," goes a Hungarian saying. Someday, North Koreans may say something similar: "What could be worse than the Kim dynasty? What comes next."
— (Andrei Lankov, The Real North Korea)

As many experts had feared, Kim Jong-un dies prematurely in 2030—before his daughter Kim Ju-ae reaches adulthood. His sudden absence sends shockwaves through the North Korean political structure, raising urgent questions about the stability of succession.

Given the precedent set during Kim Jong-il's death in 2011, when his sister Kim Kyong-hui and her husband Jang Song-thaek acted as regents, Kim Yo-jong—Kim Jong-un's younger sister and a key figure in the regime—is expected to step forward. She is not only family but also holds vast institutional knowledge through her control of Office 39 and the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD).

Bruce Klingner, a former CIA analyst, and Michael Madden, a leading researcher at the Stimson Center, suggest[159] that Kim Yo-jong would likely serve as regent to young Kim Ju-ae. In doing so, she would aim to preserve the dynasty while assuming de facto control. The arrangement may ensure temporary stability, but sustaining long-term authority proves challenging.

Unlike her brother, Kim Yo-jong lacks strong ties to the military. Her leadership is met with suspicion from the Korean People's Army, which remains reluctant to accept either a young female successor or a woman regent with little direct military experience. As tensions rise, Kim Yo-jong attempts to consolidate power by purging dissenting officers.

Her husband, a senior figure in the General Political Bureau, works behind the scenes to rally support within the ranks. However, the military grows increasingly uneasy. Despite her prominence in diplomacy with South Korea and the U.S., her perceived detachment from military affairs weakens her standing.

Eventually, a faction within the army anticipates her purge plans and launches a preemptive coup. The conflict, while rooted in personal survival, spirals into a broader institutional power struggle. A potential civil war looms—an unthinkable scenario for a nuclear-armed state.

The worst is narrowly avoided. The Kim family is ousted in a military power play. With the dynasty's collapse, the armed forces emerge victorious.

The seeds of this shift were planted earlier. Though Kim Jong-un had elevated the Party over the military in a bid to move away from *songun* politics, North Korea's growing military support for Russia during the war in Ukraine emboldened the army. In supplying weapons and manpower, the military gained political capital and economic clout.

Among those who rose was a little-known officer who fought alongside Russian forces. Returning home, he was heralded as a war hero. His combat credentials and foreign military ties made him untouchable—even for Kim Jong-un. The state glorified him as a defender of the homeland, building a myth around his exploits.

[159] Bruce Klingner and Michael Madden, interviews by Jaewoo Park, 2024, 2025.

Eventually, he and his allies led the internal push to remove Kim Yo-jong. Externally, however, Pyongyang crafted a different narrative: that Kim Ju-ae and her mother Ri Sol-ju had orchestrated the ouster of Kim Yo-jong to preserve the dynasty.

In truth, the Kim family lost real power. A sweeping purge followed. Loyalists were executed or exiled to rural provinces. Yet, as is often the case in North Korea, little information escaped. Emergency broadcasts announced Kim Jong-un's death and a new era, but details of the transition remained murky.

What, then, of Kim Ju-ae?

Her fate may mirror that of Princess Deokhye, the last royal daughter of Korea's Joseon dynasty, who was taken to Japan, used as a political pawn, and lived out her life in obscurity. Kim Ju-ae, once considered heir to the regime, becomes a symbolic puppet. For a time, the military parades her through state functions to project continuity. But once her image has served its purpose, she disappears from public view.

Eventually, she and her mother flee to Russia. Only then does the outside world learn the full extent of the dynasty's fall.

North Korean defectors who once sat near the throne rarely find peace. Yi Han-young, a cousin of Kim Jong-nam, defected to South Korea and published a tell-all book. He was later assassinated by North Korean agents. His sister Yi Nam-ok fled to France but canceled her memoir due to threats. Kim Han-sol, Kim Jong-nam's son, vanished after his father's murder, last seen under CIA protection. His whereabouts remain unknown. Kim Geum-sol, the elder son, is believed to live under tight surveillance in China.

Even Ko Yong-suk, Kim Jong-un's aunt who defected to the U.S., leads a low-profile life running a laundromat in New Jersey. Though her children adjusted well to American life, her daughter was denied a U.S. top-secret security clearance—solely because she was related to a dictator.

For all their distance, the shadow of the Kim name proved inescapable.

Scenario Three: "Spring in Pyongyang" and Instability

North Korea's dynastic rule is unusually enduring by historical standards. Since the end of World War II, there have been 18 known hereditary authoritarian regimes around the world. Only six of them have survived. Most of these regimes lasted an average of just 32 years. In contrast, the "The durability of the Kim regime is a historical anomaly. Twelve out of 18 family dictatorships in place since World War II have collapsed, with the average lasting 32 years. In contrast, the North Korean regime has endured for over seven decades, despite famine, economic crisis, international sanctions, and restrictions on foreign trade, as well as two transitions of power. There is currently no formidable outside challenge to the Kim dynasty, neither by the military nor by the North Korean people."
-Foreign Policy, "5 Things to Know If Kim Jong-un Dies"-

Still, the fall of the Kim Jong-un regime—should it happen—would not necessarily equate to the total collapse of the North Korean state. Collapse would imply a more rapid, chaotic process leading to institutional

disintegration. That could unfold peacefully or through violent conflict, including the possibility of armed clashes with South Korea.[160]

Andrei Lankov, a prominent North Korea expert and professor at Kookmin University in Seoul, has warned[161] that Kim Jong-un may be more likely to follow the path of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev rather than that of China's Deng Xiaoping. Gorbachev introduced perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) in the Soviet Union in the 1980s in an attempt to reform the system, but these policies eventually led to its collapse. Similarly, Kim may attempt to escape international isolation through negotiations with the United States and open up economically—moves that could earn favorable coverage from foreign media and governments.

Under a new U.S. administration more open to engagement, North Korea returns to the negotiating table. This time, Washington offers sanctions relief in exchange for a freeze—not dismantlement—of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal. The approach is controversial. Critics in the U.S. warn that such a deal rewards the North without meaningful disarmament. Nonetheless, the agreement provides Kim with a major political win. North Korea declares a "new era," and its economy begins to revive. Trade resumes. South Korean, Japanese, and even American companies cautiously enter the North Korean market. Tourism restarts, and economic activity surges.

But nuclear talks stall. No further progress is made on denuclearization. Washington is criticized for settling for arms control rather than total disarmament. The administration suffers a political blow. Yet partial openness allows outside information to seep into North Korea, and the resulting exposure begins to put serious internal pressure on the regime. These conditions generate momentum for change that even Pyongyang cannot ignore.

However, reforms often bring unintended consequences. In the Soviet Union, economic and political liberalization revealed deep flaws in the system. It led to institutional decay, intensified nationalism, and widespread economic instability. Lacking strong leadership and saddled with structural deficiencies, the USSR ultimately collapsed. In the same way, North Korea's reform process may not result in smooth democratization. It could fracture the state.

History offers cautionary examples. South Korea's April 1960 pro-democracy uprising was quickly followed by a military coup in May 1961. In France, the 1789 Revolution gave way to the Reign of Terror and eventually Napoleon's authoritarian rule. In Romania, a revolution in 1989 overthrew the communist dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu. He and his wife, Elena, were captured and executed. A temporary power vacuum led to the rise of the National Salvation Front, a group made up of former communists and military officials.

In a North Korean context, reform may trigger a power struggle between pro-reform factions and the military. Reformists would likely seek to open the country to the outside world and cooperate with South Korea, the U.S., and others. The military, deeply invested in preserving its authority, would resist any change that undermines the status quo. Reformers may reach out to South Korea for economic assistance and political support. But the military, fearing loss of control and eventual collapse, might declare martial law and crack down on reformist elements.

If this internal rift deepens, North Korea could descend into near-collapse. At this point, South Korea would face a grave decision: Should it intervene militarily to stabilize the North, possibly advancing toward Pyongyang?

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[160] Frank Sampson Jannuzi, *Can the United States Cause the Collapse of North Korea? Should We Try?* (Council on Foreign Relations, January 1999).

[161] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Or should it hold back and avoid the risk of conflict? Any advance toward the North Korean capital could result in deadly clashes with remnants of the military. The human cost could spark fierce debate among the South Korean public.

One of the most perilous factors in this scenario is the presence of North Korea's nuclear weapons. The country is believed to possess between 75 and 320 kilograms of highly enriched uranium, along with 39 nuclear-related sites and 49 missile facilities.[162] If these weapons fall into the wrong hands during a leadership vacuum, the risks would be immense. In response, South Korea and the U.S. would need to act swiftly. They would likely revisit Operational Plan 5029, a joint military strategy first discussed in 2019 to respond to potential instability in the North. According to the plan, South Korea would lead most operations, while the U.S. would take charge of missions involving weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), including special forces landings.

Despite prior joint drills, the real-world execution of these plans during a power collapse would be fraught with uncertainty. Gaining physical control of North Korea's nuclear arsenal would be both urgent and diplomatically sensitive.

As tensions escalate, China is likely to intervene first. Beijing has long viewed North Korea as a strategic buffer zone against U.S. influence in Northeast Asia. It would not stand by idly if that buffer were to collapse. Moreover, China fears a flood of North Korean refugees crossing its borders. The North's military—facing a bleak outlook in a fight against reformists—may reach out to China for support. Although the military has not always had a close relationship with Beijing, it could turn to shared socialist ideology and the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the two countries to justify collaboration.

In doing so, China could end up absorbing parts of North Korea[163]—economically, if not territorially. North Korea's economy is already heavily reliant on the U.S. dollar and Chinese yuan. Beijing might justify deeper involvement by supporting pro-China forces and establishing de facto control over northern regions, minimizing international backlash.

As Chinese intervention becomes reality, public opinion in South Korea begins to shift dramatically. Initially hesitant about military intervention, many South Koreans grow increasingly alarmed at the prospect of losing the North to Chinese influence. Nationalist sentiment surges. In response, Seoul and Washington explore the possibility of absorbing parts of North Korea. They could invoke the South Korean constitution, which designates the North as part of the national territory, and impose martial law under the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to establish control.

Still, the legal and geopolitical risks are enormous. Any move to assert control could spark a confrontation with China.

The resulting situation—North Korea's collapse, Chinese intervention, and a South Korea-U.S. response—could bring the region to the brink of war. In such a scenario, multilateral diplomacy might re-emerge in the form of six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia. What unfolds would be complex and unprecedented.

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[162] Oriana Skylar Mastro, "5 Things to Know If Kim Jong-un Dies," *Foreign Policy*, April 27, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/27/5-things-to-know-if-kim-jong-un-dies.
[163] Kyle Mizokami, "Yes, China Could Invade North Korea," *The National Interest*, March 8, 2024, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/yes-china-could-invade-north-korea-209832.

These are only hypothetical scenarios. Many variables are in play, and outcomes could combine elements of multiple possibilities or follow an entirely unexpected path. One thing remains certain: the future of North Korea remains deeply uncertain.

Epilogue

A Mother's Promise

Separation haunts the affected long after the actual incident. It is a perpetual act of violation. You know that the missing are there, just a few hours away, but you cannot see them or write to them or call them
— Without You, There Is No Us

For North Korean defectors who have rebuilt their lives in South Korea, there is perhaps no deeper longing than the hope of reuniting with the families they left behind. Some are fortunate enough to experience miraculous reunions. Others must carry the weight of silence—stories never told, words never said—etched deep in their memories.

Roughly 33,800 North Korean defectors now live in South Korea. Around 70–80 percent of them are women. Many fled not for freedom, but for survival—for the hope of feeding their children, of staying alive just one more day. Women in North Korea have historically been granted slightly more freedom to engage in private economic activity, and it was often they who crossed the frozen rivers into China. But the journey they undertook was rarely one of liberation—it was one of danger, vulnerability, and desperation.

Along the way, they encountered unspeakable violations: human trafficking, forced marriage, sexual abuse. Some were lured by promises of family or employment. Many were betrayed. Without legal status in China, these women lived in constant fear of arrest. For many, their only escape was onward—to South Korea. In the process, many were forced to leave children behind.

According to a 2020–2023 survey by the *Unification Mothers' Network*, an organization supporting women separated from their children, 87% of the 221 North Korean women interviewed had children. Of those, 79% said their children remained in China, 36% said in North Korea, and 28% had children in both places. On average, each woman was separated from at least 1.4 children. Every day, they carry the weight of guilt and longing.

"I'll be back in just two nights, son. I'm going to earn money so we can eat well."

This was the promise Lee So-yeon[164] made to her six-year-old boy before she slipped across the border into China on a bitter winter night in 2008. It was the last time she held him.

She hadn't meant to say goodbye. But her son, sensing something, climbed over a mountain to find her—his tiny frame trudging through the snow just to see her one last time. Neither of them knew this brief farewell would be their final moment together.

[164] Lee So-yeon, interview by Jaewoo Park, September 2024.

So-yeon's story is not uncommon. Trapped in a cycle of domestic violence and poverty, she struggled to make ends meet by selling vegetables in the *jangmadang*—North Korea's gray-market economy—for more than a decade. But life in the markets was unforgiving. One day, a spoiled shipment of produce left her in debt. Then came a whisper: In China, people said, you could earn good money through smuggling. And so, she made the choice.

But when she arrived, the promise of opportunity turned into a nightmare. Brokers tried to sell her into trafficking. In a desperate bid to escape, she was caught by North Korean border guards and sent to a reeducation camp. She spent two harrowing years there.

The conditions were inhumane. Prisoners endured forced labor under appalling circumstances. Those who resisted or collapsed from exhaustion were met with beatings. There was no dignity, no decency—only survival. The regime hoped such punishment would scare defectors like Lee into submission. But the brutality only strengthened her resolve.

When she was finally released, she fled again—this time with a fiercer determination. But escape from North Korea doesn't end at the border. Her actions had consequences. Her father, once a university professor, lost his job. Her son faced a bleak future, denied the chance of higher education because of his mother's "betrayal."

Despite everything, So-yeon made it. Thanks to help from her parents, she crossed again and reached South Korea.

Freedom did not bring peace. In Seoul, she worked relentlessly. Mornings were spent scrubbing tiny rooms in low-rent dormitories for minimum wage. In the afternoon, she hauled books at a local bookstore. At night, she clocked in at a convenience store. Every cent she earned went toward her family in the North. She sent money to her parents and son through brokers. Sometimes, she heard updates. It was never enough.

She tried to bring her son to South Korea—but his father, still in the North, refused. For 16 long years, she was unable to see her child.

One day, she learned her son had a gift for painting. But his dreams of university were out of reach. His mother's defection made him a pariah. "I want to go to South Korea and study," he told her once. That was all it took. In 2019, Lee decided to help him escape. Together with a broker, they began planning.

Her desperate journey is captured in the 2023 documentary *Beyond Utopia*. In it, she speaks with a trembling voice—hopeful but terrified. She doesn't know his clothing size, or even his favorite color. She cries, blaming herself for the time lost. When they spoke on the phone before the planned escape, she didn't know it would be their last conversation.

Another broker entered the picture and demanded more money. When she refused, he reported her son to the Chinese authorities, labeling him a "political criminal's child." He was arrested.

In December 2019, her son was forcibly deported to North Korea. He disappeared into the system. After six months of interrogation by the secret police, he is believed to have been sent to a political prison camp. To this day, Lee doesn't know where he is—or if he's even alive.

When she speaks of him, her voice cracks. Her eyes well with tears. Even now, years later, the pain is still raw. Telling his story is always the hardest part. No time, no distance, can dull the pain of a mother separated from her child.

Today, Lee So-yeon carries her pain with dignity—and urgency. She pleads with the international community not to look away. She speaks out against the horrific human rights abuses suffered by children left in North Korea and those forcibly repatriated by Chinese authorities. As a mother, as a survivor, she bears a grief no one should endure.

Because in North Korea, to be born without the "Paektu bloodline"—without elite family lineage—is to be sentenced to silence. And for people like her son, silence can become a life sentence.

The Price of a Daughter

Even a moment of losing a child feels like an eternity in hell.

To those who have ever lost sight of their child even for a split second, that moment is not just fear—it is pure, bone-deep terror. The world seems to collapse into silence. Blood drains from your body. Breathing becomes impossible. Your instinct takes over—you scream your child's name, frantically search their face in the crowd, plead for help from strangers. In your mind, the worst possible images flicker in and out like a nightmare you can't wake from. Time, cruel and indifferent, slows to a crawl.

And when you finally hold your child again—when your trembling arms wrap around that warm little body—the surge of emotion is too great to name. You cry, you scold, you apologize, and then you cry some more. All you know is that nothing—nothing—matters more than this fragile life you almost lost.

But what if you couldn't hold your child again? What if your arms were forced to remain empty?

That's the grief Lee Soon-sil has lived with.[165] A North Korean defector now known across South Korea for her bright laugh and booming business selling North Korean cuisine—kimchi, dumplings, Pyongyang cold noodles—she is hailed as a "successful escapee." Featured on KBS's entertainment show *The Boss Has Donkey Ears*, she appears to embody hope, resilience, and triumph.

But her past? It's a story soaked in darkness.

She once wore a soldier's uniform—a military nurse for 11 years. But after her service ended, there was nothing waiting for her in North Korea except grinding poverty. Orphaned during the Arduous March of the 1990s, she lived as a *kkotjaebi (꽃제비)*, a street child, before being detained by the secret police. There, she met a man, married him, and became pregnant. But the marriage was a cage. Her in-laws were destitute, and in North Korea, a bride is expected to provide everything: linens, clothes, food. She had nothing.

[165] Lee Soon-sil, interview by Jaewoo Park, March 2025.

Soon, the abuse began. Her sister-in-law slapped her. Her in-laws cursed her. They made her cook, clean, serve, and grovel. One misstep and fists would fly. She often went without food, surviving on tree bark and weeds. When there was no more to eat, she starved—and was mocked for not dying faster.

Eventually, she ran. Back to the streets. Back to the cold. Then one night, she felt pain tear through her body and realized—she was in labor. She gave birth on the icy pavement outside Hyesan Station. In the dead of winter, under snow and silence, her daughter Chungdan was born. With a frozen body and a burning will, she clutched her baby to her chest and stumbled through the night. There was no shelter, no hand to hold, only one desperate thought: *"I have to keep this child alive."*

But fate was merciless. When Chungdan was not even three years old, Lee made her ninth attempt to escape. She crossed the Tumen River again, only to fall into a different hell. There, lurking in the shadows, were traffickers—predators hunting women and children like prey.

She held her daughter close. But they pried her child away. No screaming helped. No begging mattered. Her baby, her everything, was wrenched from her arms and sold—right before her eyes. Chungdan's cries, her little fingers reaching back—it all burned into Lee's memory, a wound that never closed. The child was sold for 3,000 yuan—just over 100 U.S. dollars. Lee herself was sold for 5,000 yuan. No words can explain the pain that followed. But she didn't die. She couldn't. She had to live—for one reason alone: the hope that she might one day find her daughter again.

So she did. She ran again—escaped from China, crossed Mongolia, and in 2007, reached South Korea. She built a life. A successful business. Appearances on TV. Lectures, activism, attention. But none of that fills the silence Chungdan left behind.

In her home, there are dolls. Dozens of dolls—little reminders of the daughter she couldn't raise. Chungdan had once begged her for a doll. Lee had promised: "Someday, I'll buy you one." Now, years later, she's surrounded by them.

Each doll is an apology. Each one says, *"I'm sorry I wasn't there."* "Wherever you are, please… just live. Please be happy."

She whispers this every day. And though she's certain her daughter must now be in her twenties, in her dreams, Chungdan remains frozen in time—a toddler in her arms, smiling, unaware of the storm the world had planned. Lee believes her daughter is still alive. She must be. Because that belief is what keeps her breathing.

And somewhere, in the midst of all that loss, she remembers: she, too, was once someone's daughter. She, too, was meant to be cherished.

-End-

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