

In the Shadow of Greatness

Evil is committed by human beings who are only life-size when you see them up close.

—Sheila Fitzpatrick¹

When all is said and done, the life of North Korea's Kim Jong-il—the Dear Leader and the Great General, as so many called him—was a paradox: at once a supreme victory, and a deplorable failure.

From the earliest days of his childhood, he was nurtured at the very epicenter of state power, and yet the path to securing power of his own was by no means smooth or imple. As the oldest son and heir of North Korea's revered "Great" Leader, his whole life would be one long cycle of seeking and seizing power, then scrambling to hold on to and expand it.

From a young age, Kim Jong-il enjoyed extraordinary privilege, yet he lived in isolation from his surroundings. Immersed in the presence of absolute power, he acquired the vigilance that the powerful must always have, not least as it pertains to the people closest at hand. The nature of power, he learned, was constant readiness: being poised for struggle.

Kim Jong-il learned to think of the people around him as competitors first and foremost, all of them stealthily, hungrily looking for their right moment to take power. He heard rumors that his father Kim Il-sung was thinking of dividing his life-long built regime among his three sons: specifically, the military and administrative divisions would be given to his stepbrothers Pyong-il and Yong-il, respectively, and the Workers' Party apparatus to him. It sounded plausible as his father was getting old; his stepmother Kim Song-ae, then-much loved

by his father, was fully active; and his uncle Kim Yong-ju allegedly in his own way also bore a different intention.

As a youth, Kim faced a very particular set of challenges. He was a defiant teenager, the cause of headaches even for his all-powerful “Great Leader” father. Kim Il-sung consulted his top education experts, “Since my wife (Kim Song-ae) isn’t his biological mother, my son is deviating from both myself and my wife. He is going awry. My whole attention is given to playing mediator between my wife and my son, but he is going even further astray. . . . All conditions are more than sufficiently met, yet the kid vents anger for no reason, and he bursts in fury at his stepmother and even at me . . .” The elder Kim ended up issuing an order that a special school be built for children of stepfamilies.²

It is not clear exactly when and how younger Kim, a defiant adolescent with a “soft chubby complexion and two cheeks that would redden in shyness,” grew up to become the very definition of power hungry. What is quite certain is that his puberty was like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar in a cocoon: Kim Jong-il emerged completely different in character and disposition.

He won his father’s goodwill by putting the finishing touches on his father’s nearly godlike ruling authority. At the same time, he also learned to weaken his elderly father by surrounding him with young women who could make him happy.

Hwang Jang-yop recalled that Kim Jong-il was seen as the heir to power as early as the late 1950s—upon a trip to the Soviet Union, to be exact, where he accompanied his father on a visit to the country to observe one of the regular congresses of the CPSU, or Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Hwang was among the delegation, as secretary. He wrote that Kim Jong-il meticulously took care of his father from official meetings to his daily itinerary, writing up reports of each day’s events and preparing for the following day, even polishing his father’s shoes and setting them neatly by the front door. Kim Il-sung was moved and is quoted as saying, “My son is truly the best! I can trust no one else but him.” Not long after that, someone who had been a plausible candidate for the leadership, Kim Il-sung’s younger brother Kim Yong-ju dropped out of the race, and was sent down from Pyongyang into the countryside. Kim Jong-il got rid of his keen competitors in this way, one-by-one, finally securing the kind of power that even his father couldn’t ignore.

However, a critical moment arose when Pyongyang found itself in discord with Washington over the development of the North Korean

nuclear program, and Kim Il-sung vowed to take the initiative and hold a summit with the then-South Korean president, Kim Young-sam. Rolling up his sleeves, the aging North Korean leader declared that he would personally oversee other administrative matters, too. The issue of food insecurity was increasingly a problem. Kim Il-sung had not been properly informed of the dire reality of impending famine many of his people were facing. Even if he may have heard rumors, he remained silent. But now he was deciding to take a hands-on approach to state affairs.

No one could tell what the outcome would be, but for Kim Jong-il, it was as if he had suddenly been halted by an enormous red light on the final stretch of the road to supreme power. He was in opposition to his father, but he couldn't directly dissuade the Great Leader from his decisions. Kim Jong-il could only sidestep this crisis when his father rather fortuitously passed away.³

Thus, Kim Jong-il finally rose to become Supreme Commander. That did not mean, however, that he was free of challenges. The succession of power was both his greatest new challenge and the most critical moment of his whole life: the country he had inherited was in a hopeless state.

The pressing reality was that the son was incapable of filling the gap of his father's absence, a void left by the man who governed for almost half a century with an indisputable power that resembled theocracy. Still, Kim Jong-il had successfully seized nearly all actual authority; virtually all key government organizations, such as those for national security and state economy, were in his hands. While Kim Il-sung was still alive one could hear political chatter that the father was but a leader in name only, if you were to take into account the realities of running an authoritative state. In fact, in his final years the "Great Leader" would go as far as to break a Korean traditional taboo, writing and distributing widely a poem that sang the praises of his son:⁴

On the Paektu Mountain ridge Jong-il Peak rises,
The crystal clear Sobaeksu rapidly curls along the valley.
Already fifty years since the birth of the Bright Star of
 Hope?
Distinguished in both pen and sword, loyal and a good son,
All look up to him, and in one voice, praise him,
Their cheers so loud, the heavens and the earth shake.⁵

In spite of everything, Kim Jong-il would discover that acquiring power was a completely separate thing from living up to the image of a people's leader, with all the personal charisma that it commonly entails. The crown prince was completely incapable of filling the tremendous gap left by his father's death. After all the years that he had worked so hard, fought and prepared for this very moment to come, Kim Jong-il was at a loss. Seizing and exercising real power in his father's shadow was totally different from stepping into the spotlight that his father had occupied. How could he have failed to foresee this, and not made any preparations for it?

Kim Jong-il was strikingly different from his father. Compared to his well-built, handsome father whom women found attractive, the son fell short in height and looks.⁶ Sometimes he would even remark to others about how short he was. In one private sitting, he showed particular interest in the traits of being short and having short legs.⁷ He also once casually let it drop that he wore height-enhancing platform shoes, a popular trend among young people at the time, so that he might seem at least an inch taller.

This was not merely a matter of petty personal interest. In Korea, a pleasant physical appearance acts as an important barometer of one's thoughts about others. To sum up the mentality in a nutshell, Koreans look at a person's body and appearance first, then speaking, then writing, and then finally judgment, in that order. This propensity is apt to be especially prevalent under a dictatorship where the popular image of the leader is a matter of utmost importance.

An even more serious problem at the time was the fact that Kim Jong-il had no major achievements to his name in either the domestic or the international arenas. His father had led anti-Japan resistance, founded the nation, achieved the so-called "victory" of the Korean War (which the North Korean regime calls the "Glorious Fatherland Liberalization War") and led the ensuing post-war reconstruction. His father also enjoyed a fair amount of public support worldwide. Particularly after World War II, the majority of the world's political sentiment was tilted toward either communism or socialism. There were sympathizers even among the ruling class of imperial states, and it was common to see people turn against the land of their birth to help socialist causes. It wasn't rare to hear news of "traitors against the state" among intellectuals of the Western imperialist states and members of the ruling class.

Sentiment had evolved in quite a different direction by the time Kim Jong-il had succeeded to power. The myth of socialism was looking like a relic of the past. Arising in its place instead was the so-called neoliberalism of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan: an ideology of efficiency and productivity, free markets, consumption, and borderless capital.

The biggest obstacle of all was the reality that North Korea was in crisis. The Juche Kingdom that Kim Jong-il inherited was literally bankrupt. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Communist regimes in the former USSR and Eastern European countries collapsed like dominoes. Then these once strong and reliable supporters of North Korea lined up to establish diplomatic ties with the South, one after another.

Yet the greatest shock for the North Korean regime wasn't ideological or political, it was economic. Compared to the South Korean economy, which achieved remarkable, rapid progress from the 1970s onward, the North Korean economy lost its driving force for development, and descended into a swamp of stagnation. In straightened times, economic cooperation between socialist countries, particularly in terms of foreign aid, became a thing of the past.

The imminent problem was the food. When Kim Jong-il took the seat of the "Great Leader," the North Korean people were starving.

From the late 1980s until the mid 1990s, North Korea's grain production plunged by one third. The fundamental cause was the regime's terrible policy choices, but a series of climate misfortunes, including a series of floods, also played a role. Reduced grain production in turn sharply increased the risk of a political crisis.

With the collapse of the food distribution system, one of the key elements by which North Korean society was controlled from the center, citizens scattered throughout the country to find means of survival. The regime could no longer feasibly restrict them from travelling as it had in the past. Widespread starvation naturally impacted factories and collective farms, taking its toll on their production and management. The land of *juche* had to swallow its pride and request food aid from the international community.

Meanwhile, North Korea's arch rival, South Korea, steadily became more democratic and economically developed. Although it went through years of demonstrations and tear-gassed streets, South Korea was unmistakably reaching a stable political equilibrium.

Hwang Jang-yop said that in the mid 1980s he confided his fears about a possible crisis with one of his former university students, one Jang Song-thaek. "If things carry on this way, won't our economy collapse? What can we do?"

To which Jang replied placidly, "That will never happen."

Taken aback at the answer, Hwang described several pressing difficulties and asked once again, "Can we take measures against this?"

And once again, Jang replied in an unmoved manner, "Our economy has already collapsed, so how can it collapse again?"⁸

That may just be the most accurate comment ever made about North Korea's economic situation at the time. But more importantly, it reflects Jang's position and his view of the regime. He was part of the power structure, held a major position within that system; he was a member of the core group, a Kim family insider. But despite all that, ideologically he was unsteady, standing on the very edge of the North Korean system and ruling clique.

Some statistics on North Korea put the number of people killed by the famine somewhere between two and three million. One study based on more objective data estimates between 300,000 to 400,000 died between 1996 and 1998 during what came to be known as the "Arduous March."

The North Korean regime couldn't provide its people with rice, but it had a rich surplus of propaganda and demagoguery, from political slogans to light entertainment. This was what the successor to the "Great Leader" did best. The resources of propaganda were the materials most familiar to the ruling class and people. The regime made use of the way Kim Il-sung led partisans on a 100-day march to avoid Japanese attack, a historical memory of extreme cold, hunger, and suffering that nonetheless stirs up a swell of pride linked to resistance against Japanese Imperial occupation in the winter of 1938 to 1939:

"Remember the Arduous March! Bear in mind the Glory that follows that Pain."

The North Korean people, who are used to hardships, dutifully obeyed those orders. Slogans instead of rice; glory instead of nutrition.

But amid all the problems facing the North Korean state, the biggest of them all was one nobody thought of, including Kim Jong-il himself.

Every now and then Kim Jong-il had his doubtful moments. Was he indeed the ruler of his regime, or a prisoner locked up in it?

Did he really have the power and capacity to move and control his State according to his will? Or was he merely managing and running a system built by his father, unable to change or alter things in his way? Was the power he inherited limited to that of a servant doorkeeper who must guard the system at all costs?

No one understood better than he the paradox and weakness of the system. Kim Jong-il also knew better than anyone in his country about what was going on outside the “Workers’ Paradise,” including all of the remarkable changes occurring on the global stage. Kim Jong-il himself had long since abandoned any inner faith in socialism. Socialist countries were not only impoverished, but also culturally unrefined and inferior. Kim himself felt attracted to the West. He once even tried to visit a country in Europe using a fake passport. But the passport was soon detected, and his special, secret excursion cancelled.

Nevertheless, the Western bastards act as freely as they please . . . but look at the Socialist countries. In this video I saw, which was sent recently, really, starting from that guy called Gerasimov (the head of the USSR delegation) is it? They are all somehow rigid and give the air of country bumpkins.¹⁰

Even the ideologies of Marx and Lenin could no longer inspire people, to say nothing of Stalin. The former great names had disappeared; they were nonexistent in the minds and conversations of the North Korean people. The firmly held mythos of socialist revolution and the regime’s socialist system collapsed in front of the immense power of the market. The socialist system collapsed early in its countries of origin, the USSR and China, with a whimper rather than a roar. North Korea’s socialist allies raced each other to engage South Korea, while even the USSR, the birthplace of the revolution, came to Seoul for a loan. North Korea’s rival from birth, a state with which it was thought “impossible to reconcile and coexist under the same sky,” South Korea continued to develop remarkably despite being in the midst of a tumultuous era.¹¹

What and where could one begin to reform?

Nothing was easy. One false move could jeopardize the power he had inherited. Though Kim Jong-il may have tried to assess his system’s problems and make amendments in a logical fashion, these were highly likely to run into obstacles.

The problems overlapped in several layers. Were it not for South Korea, the North could by all means have conducted an open-door reform policy just like other socialist countries. Yet it had to be aware of the South if it wished to maintain regime legitimacy, which is to say its policy experiments could not be seen as following in the footsteps of the South. Doing so would be admitting that the South's line after liberalization in 1945 was correct, and the North's was incorrect. It couldn't admit defeat in the fifty-year competition for superiority.

Kim also had to consider his filial duty toward his father. As the son who had succeeded to power, he couldn't appear to downplay his father's achievements. As in other Socialist countries, such as the USSR or China, if a leader deviated from or criticized his predecessors' policies, all blame would instantly be focused on him.

Moreover, the regime, which had been firmly sustained with a firm grip for several decades, could be gravely affected if the leader pressed the wrong button. In the case of the USSR, when Gorbachev, under the slogans of Glasnost (meaning openness) and Perestroika (meaning restructuring), attempted reform, it was comparable to simply opening the window for a while to air out the house. Doing the same thing in North Korea could bring down the pillars and cause the rafters to buckle.

The father, Kim Il-sung, probably was well aware of these facts, and would have meticulously planned things, including his people's consideration of the time after his death. Among other preventative measures, the older Kim would have reminded his son of the danger of reform and opening.

Once the father, sensing a downturn in his health, secretly summoned ten of his most trusted men. He took out ten pistols with silver plated handgrips and gave them out. Then he addressed them in a serious tone, saying that when he's gone, if his son, the heir, Kim Jong-il were to dare deviate from the regime's policies or plays around with reform, "Any one of you, shoot him with this gun."

However, not a single person took his dying wish literally. And there was probably not one among them who would dare utter the words and convey the message directly to the new leader. If anyone dared to pass on the news, it would have been preceded by a whole lot of masking rhetoric and delivered with extreme caution.¹² At any rate, it was a cold and severe final wish the leader set forth for his son, the successor.

Throughout the history of both the East and the West, a curse follows dictators who monopolize massive power and authority: they cannot trust anyone.¹³ Kim Jong-il was no exception.

Making matters worse, there were traitors among his relatives. Despite granting all sorts of privileges to the siblings of his wives and his nephews and nieces, they kept fleeing to enemy countries. His first wife, Song Hye-rim's older sister Song Hye-rang, as well as her children, Ri Il-nam (who took the name Yi Han-young in the South) and Ri Nam-ok, were considered to be close relatives, yet they sought asylum in the South. His third wife, Ko Yong-hui's¹⁴ younger sister Ko Yong-suk, and her husband Pak Keon were of VIP status, too, yet along with their children they sought asylum in the United States.¹⁵

Although he had abducted them to the North in the first instance, Kim Jong-il gave enormous privileges to a famous couple, South Korean film director Shin Sang-ok and actress Choi Eun-hee, believing they would remain loyal to him, but in Vienna in 1986 they too seized an opportunity to flee the regime. Up to then, whenever his close acquaintances reported suspicions that the couple might escape, Kim Jong-il had said, "Why would they run away? Where would they be more appreciated than here? They can make all the films they want without having to worry about money."¹⁶

But in the end, flee they did.

With this series of events, Kim Jong-il's heart remained closed and cold toward the public who were passionately pledging oaths of loyalty to him. They looked up and cheered enthusiastically, but he viewed them with cynicism, doubting their sincerity. "Mr. Shin," he told the kidnapped movie director, "that is all fake. Their cheers are all feigned."¹⁷

From the very day that he was bequeathed absolute power akin to any monarchy, Kim Jong-il became skeptical. Did his title endow him with omnipotent power and authority, or a prison cell? He once suffered from such extreme depression that he considered suicide. According to one testimony, his wife (the current ruler's mother, KoYong-hui) found him in deep contemplation with a pistol placed before him. Ko exclaimed, "Darling, what are you thinking?" and took away the gun.¹⁸

Arguably the best-known aspect of Kim Jong-il's rule was his famous "dinner parties," something his father had never done.

Stalin used to host similar events. Prominent high government officials in key positions attended vodka parties with Stalin in the

middle of the night. Even in the moment when the Soviet Union faced the peril of collapse after Germany launched a surprise attack during World War II, Stalin stopped key officials from leaving his side, which held them back from performing their duties.

Holding drinking parties frequently can be a manifestation of a ruler's anxiety about the people around him. That is, the events are also a scheme to keep major government personnel near him for as long as he could. They were therefore gatherings of artificial pleasure, emitting an atmosphere of disguised and thereby all the more exaggerated loyalty and trust.

In a way, Kim Jong-il's dinner parties had similar aspects with the so-called "room salon" parties popular among South Korean executives today.¹⁹ At such gatherings, men build camaraderie and trust as they drink like fish, all the while making advances on and even harassing female staff. Kim Jong-il was no exception in using his parties to check on loyalty to his authority and confirm the reliability of key personnel.²⁰ This was how the powerful became bound by a secretive sense of brotherhood.

However, the invitees to Kim Jong-il's night drinking parties were nervous at the honor. The invited were the leader's most trusted, as well as maybe those whom he suspected and feared the most. Both host and guests would check their fears about one another and assess their reliability through the gathering. Kim Jong-il would assemble the party invitees by his side, and for no particular reason assure them of his trust, and the guests would confirm their trust toward him. Even if only for a short while, both sides could ease their minds and be relieved.

Hwang Jang-yop, who could not handle his alcohol at all, had an extremely hard time among the heavy drinkers. On one occasion, the Dear Leader spoke to Hwang, "I would very much like to see Mr. Hwang drink for once."

Then people around Hwang all started to force drink on him. When Hwang continued to turn down their offers, finally the Dear Leader reacted and decided to offer a drink personally. He filled a glass with whisky and brought it over to Hwang, who therefore wouldn't be able to reject it. Hwang closed his eyes tight and drank it in one gulp, having steeled himself for the consequences. However, it turned out that what he drank was not whisky. Instead, it was tea.

The evening parties also had a work component. In a regime where all policy-related decisions are determined through top-down

vertical channels, the drinking parties became a rare occasion where the officials from different departments could exchange views in an ostensibly comfortable manner and off the record. Kim Jong-il could also discuss matters that were not included in official reports. But this was merely incidental; the feast venue was not suited to earnest discussion.

The Dear Leader would lose his temper if anyone imitated his night drinking parties and would punish them severely. It was natural that Kim Jong-il would harbor suspicion and anger toward his brotherhood-affirming confidantes. People who do something they themselves believe is abominable tend to find it even more loathsome when their close acquaintances imitate them. Thus, Kim Jong-il would be overwhelmed with complex emotions when he saw his close personnel imitating his parties.

This complex feeling would eventually erupt into wild fury.

Amongst all the difficulties, during the seventeen long years that Kim Jong-il was Supreme Leader, at least he succeeded in protecting the system he had inherited and in passing on the power to his successor. This was no simple task. Yet, significantly, the North Korean system was in fact much more stable and consolidated than when he inherited it.

The greatest and most realistic success was completing the regime's nuclear weapons development program while inter-Korean relations were on relatively good terms. The temporary safety afforded by a reduced military threat was an economic boon for the South as well. Kim Jong-il made good use of the period on his own terms to revive declining regime authority.

Those who have met Kim Jong-il judged that rather than being a politician he was closer to a hot-tempered and emotional artist. "Sensitive and intuitive rather than reasonable and logical" was the evaluation of Lim Dong-won²¹ after he visited Pyongyang to meet Kim as part of the South Korean government's preparations for the first inter-Korean summit of June 15, 2000.²² Lim's character analysis comes with a negative connotation, but it is important to consider North Korea's special circumstances. In so-called "normal" cases, power is controlled and exercised following well-established precedents and institutions in an environment where the ruling system's legitimacy is commonly accepted by the people.

However, despots or tyrants must take power with their own strength, and create by themselves the environment to govern and

to exert it.²³ They are akin to artists making masterpieces, realizing their will and determination with hostile materials in unfavorable circumstances. One could compare it to the Renaissance sculptors who took cold, lifeless marble and created upon it forms which seem alive with warm blood flowing beneath their flexible, curved lines. If not an artist, one could imagine a magician leading people away from reality to a world of fantasy by manipulating their senses.

Were Kim Jong-il a man of logical and reasonable thinking, North Korea's Kim family regime might not exist today. Had Kim Jong-il been a man of reason like Mikhael Gorbachev, and thereby had attempted to reasonably reform his crisis-ridden state, it would have been impossible for him to succeed his father and the North Korean regime would not be in the condition we find it today. Among those who met Kim Jong-il during his lifetime, some testified that he was unable to discuss a subject consistently and logically, and that he had such a short attention span that one could not follow his train of thought. However, this also could be an exceptional merit.

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to have two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.²⁴ (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Kim Jong-il was someone who had the capacity to simultaneously think of several matters that conflicted with one another. In that respect, he had a different talent from his father, who had a gift for riding the tides of an era of socialism. One of the South's most important personnel in charge of North Korean affairs over many years thought highly of Kim Jong-il's political abilities:

North Korea managed to survive the crisis of the '90s largely thanks to Kim Jong-il's abilities. In a certain sense, he was more competent than his father Kim Il-sung. I was always nervous during the (second) inter-Korean Summit. Frankly speaking, President Roh Moo-hyun was no match for him.²⁵

Kim Jong-il was a sensitive person, forbidding his personal bodyguards from using impolite grammar forms regardless of rank or position.²⁶ This was a measure taken to forestall the possibility of emotional conflict rising from rough verbal expressions among men who were,

after all, standing on guard near him with lethal arms in hand. One couldn't be too careful as no one knew how violent men might react when provoked.

Kim Il-sung once said, "The Party is about running people." Kim Jong-il once said, "Running people is about managing emotions." In short, Kim Jong-il paid a greater degree of attention to people's emotions than their thoughts.

Kim Jong-il mobilized intellectuals volunteering for the regime, and had them devise theories to justify his authority. Nevertheless, he himself did not think much of them. The reason he had these theories made was not to prevent people from "thinking" but to prohibit them from taking interest in "other thoughts."

In the few years prior to his death, Kim Jong-il was immersed in thought. In the end, what was this power that he had devoted so much effort to gaining? What did it mean to him personally, or for the North Korean people? Just as money itself is the goal for misers, is power itself the aim of power?

Whenever he'd ponder this he'd be upset for awhile, just like someone suffering from extreme depression. But he soon pulled himself together, and looked to the tasks before him.

Lying on his death bed, the tyrant of Florence in the medieval period, Lorenzo Il Magnifico of the Medici family reflected on his past sins and couldn't help fearing for the days to come. He called for Friar Girolamo Savonarola, confessed to him, and asked for forgiveness. Savonarola named three conditions.

First, that he must confess every single sin he had committed. The tyrant easily agreed. Second, that he should return all of his unlawfully accumulated property to the original owners. Lorenzo immediately agreed to this condition, too. And third, to return his illegally usurped power to the people. But to this, the Medici head gave no reply and turned his back. Even in his final moments, political power meant more to him than his own soul.²⁷

Kim Jong-il skillfully governed his regime throughout the critical 1990s, which meant that he won at least a strategic victory at the level of authoritative power. He not only tackled the biggest crisis the Kim regime faced—the "ordeal" of the Sunshine Policy—but made it a brilliant success.

From the beginning, he had read the intentions of South Korean President Kim Daejung. The latter was no ordinary guy. Unlike other,

ordinary South Korean politicians, he had studied North Korea and unification problems for decades. He would say that during his long imprisonment he imagined playing chess with the Great Leader and leading the game. In that sense, he saw himself as a huge threat to the North Korean regime.

The name "Sunshine Policy" came across as a serious threat, too. It claimed to consist of truthful reconciliation and exchange, and cooperation not only with President Kim but also between the two Koreas. But Kim Jong-il was well aware of the dark pitfall hidden within the warm sunlight. The warm, bright sun's rays would eventually make North Korea take off its protective overcoat. Its shaggy body would be exposed thanks to the sunlight. The sun's warmth and brightness to him meant death.²⁸

But rather than rejecting this sunshine, he used it to his benefit: believing that he could reinforce his position, he set up an environment aimed at weakening the South Korean system from within the South itself. And this strategy turned out to be very effective.

First of all, he needed to earn time in order to gain power. Ideologically, he did not plan on emphasizing socialism which had already seen its glory days. Instead, he emphasized the weakness of the South, along with the phrases "the Korean people (*minjok*)," "between us Koreans (*uri minjokkkiri*)," and "sovereign autonomy (*jajuseong*)," which had an immediate effect on the North Korean public.

He sought to draw as much material aid as possible from the South. In the process, he believed he could chip away at the South's anti-North national security capabilities, and foster an anti-U.S., pro-North group inside. But while strengthening exchanges and cooperation with the South, he moved to prevent loose discipline and code violations in the North. His strategy over the ten years of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations can be seen as quite appropriate.

Once the Lee Myung-bak government took power in early 2008, there were alterations in inter-Korean relations, but Kim Jong-il did not worry too much, for North Korea was not the same country that it had been a decade earlier. Whatever people may argue, his North Korea had become a nuclear state, which neither the United States nor any other power could ignore.

Of course, the North Korean economy had endless problems. But the North Korean people just stayed put and remained faith-

ful to the regime until they died, or at worst fled their country and sought survival (mainly to northeast China, South Korea, or a few other countries). They did not openly vent their dissatisfaction within North Korea; the system simply did not permit it.

Kim Jong-il spent most of his life planning to become state leader, and enjoyed only a short time (seventeen years) living his dream. Yet he managed some remarkable achievements during that period.

Nevertheless, no matter how great and secure a leader's power and authority, all leaders become powerless in the face of fundamental human limits. In history, it is common to see political leaders fight long and hard to win their titles, only to experience a pathetic setback known as the human condition. The grandest, most secure power becomes useless against a mortal fate no man can avoid.

Would it be a consolation for a living leader, who has exercised absolute power, to know that his descendants will all remember him and hold memorials for him? Would he find solace at the thought that his followers will tear up parts of his body to embalm him and preserve him forever?

The fundamental cause of the setback lies in the leader himself: his fantasy that power will solve everything for him, and his imagination that absolute power can enable him to overcome the impossible. Having bet all he had on the power of mortal men, the shock and setback of reality would have been indescribable.

Just like anyone else, there was not one single aspect to Kim Jong-il's character. On the contrary, he had a much more complicated personality than most ordinary people. He would be indifferent to sending even his closest personnel or relatives to the gallows, and could enjoy with his family an exquisite gourmet meal, which ordinary North Koreans could never dream of, straight after hearing a report of many citizens dying of hunger. Even when his people were in a dire state after floods and food shortage, "as if he weren't aware of the situation," he was absorbed only in jet skis.²⁹

On the other hand, he would take pity on himself and weep, and could easily shed a tear upon hearing a "sentimental" song. He also cried "like a child" when his son left home to go and study overseas.³⁰ When a staff member walked away from his post then, upon being called came running straight out of the shower, Kim planned to "give him a good scolding" but then took pity after putting himself in the man's mother's shoes. Another time he shot a pregnant deer while

hunting, but then felt tremendous remorse and had the beast sent to a maternity hospital. He sighed in relief after hearing a report that “the doe gave birth safely and is well along with her fawn.”³¹

Kim Jong-il was a man of paradoxical qualities. His girlfriend Song Hye-rim described him as a “meticulous and humorous comedian,”³² but he was nonetheless capable of ordering acts of terror and abductions of women and children. Possessed of a cowardly spirit, he would choose to travel for hours and even days by train instead of flying because of his morbid fears of airplanes. However, there was also a belligerent, even nihilistic character about him, which believed that if North Korea were to lose in a war, there would be no need for the world to exist thereafter.³³

French writer Albert Camus once said that Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* could have destroyed the whole world for his Catherine, but he wouldn't have tried to justify his acts with reasonable words. How should one see Kim Jong-il's thinking that if North Korea were to lose in a war, the whole Earth would have to go down with it? Not to mention his father Kim Il-sung's mind, which praised those words and thoughts?

Actually, North Korea's rulers are not alone in thinking along these lines. Several dictators from past centuries would have wanted perhaps not the whole world but at least their own country to go down with them if their regimes collapsed.

Before turning 70, Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke. With some difficulty he did recover, but his future prospects were not bright. He was the party, the regime, and the state—a situation he had brought about of his own accord. But now he couldn't perform those roles properly. His aides called for doctors within the regime and also from afar. Invited under top secrecy, medics were compensated with the utmost caution. When traditional Chinese medicine doctors were invited from China, about a dozen patients of similar physique and similar illnesses to Kim Jong-il were laid down with their faces covered before the doctors for diagnosis. This was to prevent the leader's health information from being leaked to Chinese intelligence. The doctors from China examined several patients with the same illness, but none of them could tell which one was Kim Jong-il. Therefore, it goes without saying that the doctors couldn't gather any proper information about his health. Of course, a person's symptoms vary hugely depending on the severity of the illness.

Medics flown in from the West at enormous expense counseled that even if Kim Jong-il could be cured right then, he ought to continue taking extreme caution, otherwise he would once again find himself in a critical condition. Discreet measures of precaution were taken to keep information regarding the leader's health absolutely classified, but foreign intelligence agencies judged that Kim would suffer another health setback in about three years. Most noteworthy was U.S. intelligence, which was the most precise: estimating that Kim had only two or three more years to live. Even on his death bed, other sacrifices were called for. Once Kim Jong-il had fallen into critical condition, three doctors were summoned to take turns in eight-hour shifts to treat the Dear Leader. The doctor who was with Kim at his final moment attempted to perform the necessary emergency CPR, but Kim died on his lap. The poor doctor fainted. Yet that would turn out to be his good fortune. The other two doctors, who were off duty, were sent to labor camps for failing to take care of Kim Jong-il in his final moments.³⁴

The last few years of Kim Jong-il were a succession of crises—both domestic and international. After the conservatives regained power in the South, Kim could no longer rely on inter-Korean economic aid as he had during the previous decade. In late 2008, the Six-Party Talks were suspended over the issue of onsite inspections. In the following year, North Korea openly declared its status as a nuclear weapons power after conducting its second nuclear test, worsening the regime's relationship with all of its neighbors as well as with the West. With the power transfer from Kim Jong-il to his second son Kim Jong-un only a matter of time, a reshuffle of the cabinet brought inevitable turbulence. Most noticeably, the currency reform measure of November 2009 caused an economic recession that severely impacted small and medium-sized traders as well as ordinary citizens.

Seen through a wide-angle lens, the seeds of Kim's failure lay in his success. His greatest success was that his power was absolute, and it was rendered entirely arbitrary. And for this, he mobilized the intellectuals. Even they, who are said to seek the truth and facts of life, along with beauty and reward, helped Kim abuse his infinite power to his heart's content. They coined new words and phrases: Juche, Marshal Theory, Sociopolitical Life Theory, the Arduous March, and so forth. For the sake of ideological persuasion, the state had to risk economic losses. However, the other side of all this phenomenal

success was a runaway failure totally out of control. Of course, the failure was conceived within the success.

Arguably the biggest achievement of modern times is that rules—accepted by all participants—have taken root in highly competitive fields. This is true in all areas of human activity, from sporting competition to the acquisition of wealth. Whether it is a match or a catch, winners and losers in even the roughest and most confusing sports are determined by sophisticated rules rather than naked violence. Just as winner and loser not only accept the outcome but even congratulate the winner, losers too receive a certain recognition. There is a Western proverb: “The rules of fair play do not apply in love and war.” Yet, even in the most irrational fields of love and war, certain rules have emerged.

Even in that fiercest arena of competition—the struggle for power known as politics—certain rules have emerged in the modern era. Generally, humans will risk life and limb for the sake of power. Relations with family and friends alike fade away in front of this struggle.

Plausible justifications are made, but fundamentally the question is to take control of and maintain power, and then to increase it to make it as mighty as one can. Henry Kissinger is quoted as saying, “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac.” People seek power and continue to do so despite all the obstacles they face during the process.³⁵ The sphere of power struggle is naturally anarchical; therefore, it becomes hard to follow the rules.

However, finally, even the tumult of a power struggle settles eventually back into the normalcy of day-to-day life. The unstable days when it is impossible to know what one's future holds and the brutal mercilessness filling the air with the scent of blood dissipate. The defeated willingly (or willfully suppressing their bitterness) acknowledge defeat and offer congratulations to the winner. These days, competitors who lose in the power struggle are generally guaranteed not only their personal safety, but also their social and political status.

Countries which emerge from revolutions or other external ruptures are apt to go through tough times for a while during the succession of power. The Kim Jong-il regime's irreconcilable foe, South Korea, was no exception. In the succession process of presidential governments, South Korean leaders too ignored some of the rules. Then, some four decades after the birth of the republic, the country managed—barely—to enact a stable, revised constitution which eased

the struggle for power, and gave everyone rules they could abide. As a result, competitors today face their struggles with a smile, and the defeated candidates send flowers and convey their congratulations to the winners. Even though in heart they may feel bitter, the losers have not lost everything.

In contrast, Kim Il-sung focused only on the task of aggregating all power to himself, while totally neglecting the matter of enacting a reasonable and stable legal process that could succeed him. He avoided this most important matter by simply bestowing power upon his son. The commonsense fact that no government can be stabilized without rational legislation on the succession of power had no meaning to the late founder of North Korea.

What is more, Kim Il-sung had not even thought about a hereditary dictatorship, where, after his son, his grandson would inherit the regime. Had he conceived that “the Kim family will succeed to power,” he surely would have paid more attention to his grandchildren while alive. But there is no indication that he took the slightest interest in the third generation of his dynasty. Were there at least one photograph remaining in which he appeared with his grandchildren, it would have been very useful for the current third-generation leader.

With abject failure in the matter of placing competition for and succession to power into the frame of rational legislation, so North Korea ended up painting itself into a corner. That is because alternative options can be effective only when it is possible to change the government.

But when the supreme leader continues to rule after his death, remaining as an embalmed autocrat, there is only the past, and then some more of the past.

Kim Jong-il was not unaware of this fact. Simply put, because the situation had no easy solution, he just kept procrastinating. He knew it would be a reckless risk to hand power down to his children. And he went so far as to leak his thoughts now and again to people around him. Faced with the reality of his physical limits, his increasing age and fatigue became urgent matters requiring his attention.

He thought and thought again. But there was no easy way out. Part of the deadlock was because he had been so successful in expanding and reinforcing his power, running counter perhaps to the expectations of a number of South Korean personnel.³⁶

One day, Kim Jong-il suddenly summoned ten of his most trusted, closest men. They were personnel who played key roles in the regime.

Kim ordered them in a serious tone: "There won't be another succession of power through inheritance. The Kim family is the symbol guaranteeing the authenticity and identity of the state from now on, and will remain a subject of popular loyalty."

The style of power he spoke was in a way similar to that of the Japanese Imperial family. "The management of the State is left to you who came here today. In whatever way, devise solutions to run the country together."³⁷

Already under the Great Leader Kim Il-sung, there was the principle that the successor will be chosen regardless of blood relation, and that he would be the one who most perfectly reproduced *Kimilsungism* and had to be a man of exceptional leadership. Kim Jong-il himself also said that his own case had been exceptional, but that there wouldn't be a repeat of the father-to-son inheritance custom. He made the statement personally at a welcome dinner for officials of Chongryon, the (pro-Pyongyang) General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, upon their visit to the North, and it is said that there is also a videotape of Kim making the statement. Chongryon, thereby, concluded for a while that there would not be a third-generation succession, so when the news of Kim Jong-il doing exactly that came out in early 2009, the association strongly criticized the South Korean intelligence for its "propaganda scheme."

Considering the nature of power and power struggle, Kim's thoughts were right in principle. What people dispute most fiercely is political power. Not only between siblings, but between man and wife, father and son; it is a zone where there can be no yielding. Power is fundamentally different from other values—material values, daily comfort or love, and physical pleasures between a man and a woman.

The most important basis for a society to maintain itself normally is to settle the issue of the struggle for power within a stable legislative system. How can a government have people abide by certain rules and norms in the process of struggling for power? Without a solution to this matter, the long-term stabilization of a society or even its minimum sustainment becomes impossible.

Nevertheless, from Kim Jong-il's point of view, some countries appeared to have succeeded in that difficult task. Nearby, North Korea's foe South Korea seemed to have succeeded in adapting new laws to keep struggles for power and power succession bound by certain rules and norms. But Kim Jong-il could not do likewise. Ought he to continue to take risks against his people's innate nature?