

## **Institutionalization of the cult of the Kims: its implications for North Korean political succession**

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By citing North Korean sources, the South Korean media have recently delivered the news that Kim Jong Il had already chosen his third son, Kim Jong Un, as his political successor in late 2008 or early 2009. He selected a son who was still young and inexperienced. What was the reason behind this decision? This paper attempts to provide a convincing answer to this perplexing question. According to institutionalists, individual actors develop an institution, and the institution in turn affects the actors and restrains their choices. We argue that, among the many political institutions in North Korea, those closely linked to the cult of the Kim Il Sung family are directly related to the logic behind the political succession decision. The institutionalization of the cult of the family provides a justification for political succession in the state. Kim Jong Il has been one of the chief architects of the institutionalization of the cult, and the institutionalization in turn has limited his choice in selecting his successor, leading to the recent dynastic decision.

### **Introduction**

Political succession is a critical state event because the successor occupying the top position would reflect state continuity or change. Thus, to maintain stability, it is necessary for the state to stabilize the political succession process and minimize its impact. In a socialist state, a person who is elected as party general secretary is usually entitled to rule the state. In North Korea, there has been only one case of political succession at the top leadership post: from Kim Il Sung to his son, Kim Jong Il. Appointed a member of the Political Committee at the eighth plenum of the Fifth Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party in February 1974, Kim Jong Il succeeded his father. At the time of the succession, Kim Il Sung was in his early 60s, and Kim Jong Il was in his early 30s. The junior Kim had been the designated heir to his father for 20 years before the senior Kim passed away in 1994.

Kim Jong Il is now in his late 60s. He may realize from his own experience that it would take time for his successor to assume control and to secure his own power base. Kim Jong Il, like his father before him, may be strongly motivated by a desire to minimize the negative effects of political succession. In particular, his alleged stroke in 2008 might have facilitated Kim's preparation for his political future. Who would succeed Kim Jong Il?

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successor in late 2008 or early 2009.<sup>1</sup> Kim Jong Un is only in his mid-20s.<sup>2</sup> Before Kim's decision, North Korea specialists had been split on the route that North Korea would take on its future leadership succession: dynastic or non-dynastic succession.<sup>3</sup> The media coverage indicates that Kim Jong Il chose the dynastic succession route. Why did Kim select his third son as his successor? The answer may be found by understanding the institutionalization of the cult of the Kim Il Sung family because this might have critically affected Kim Jong Il's decision on his political successor.

According to institutionalists, individual actors develop institutions, and institutions in turn affect the actors and restrain their choices.<sup>4</sup> In this article it is argued that among the many political institutions in North Korea, those closely linked to the cult of the Kim Il Sung family are directly related to the logic behind the political succession decision. That is, the institutionalization of the cult of the family provides a justification for political succession in the state. Kim Jong Il has been one of the chief architects in the institutionalization of the cult of his family, and the institutionalization in turn has limited his ability to select his successor, leading to the recent decision. His decision to choose the dynastic succession route might not have been difficult because of the institutionalization of the cult.

This paper employs an institutionalist perspective to ascertain why Kim Jong Il chose the dynastic succession route. It also examines how North Korea has institutionalized the cult of the Kim family by providing a historical review, what elements the family cult contains as an institution, the logic behind the institutionalization of the family cult, and the implications of the institutionalization for political succession.

### **Institutionalization of the family cult**

Institutionalization means "the emergence of orderly, stable, *social integrating* patterns out of unstable, loosely organized, or narrowly technical activities."<sup>5</sup> It is a "cumulative process" that takes place over a considerable period of time.<sup>6</sup> When certain activities are embedded in social relations through institutionalization, actors' choices are restrained by the relations.<sup>7</sup> The institutionalization of the cult of the Kim Il Sung family has also been implemented over several decades, and the family cult has been deeply enmeshed in North Korean people's daily lives. Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il represent the center of the family cult.<sup>8</sup>

This institutionalization can be divided into two periods: the pre-family cult period from 1945 to 1966, and the family cult period from 1967 to the present. The cult is rooted in Kim Il Sung's cult of personality. As early as 1946, after North Korea's liberation from the Japanese occupation, North Korean writers such as Han Sol Ya began propagating the cult of Kim.<sup>9</sup> The occupying Soviets led the personality cult to transform Kim into a Korean Stalin to enhance his political legitimacy. His anti-Japanese independence struggle, particularly guerrilla warfare, was the key substance for the cult.

The more Kim Il Sung concentrated power in his hands, the more intense his personality cult became. The successful purges of Pak Hon Yong and his followers during the Korean War and Soviet Korean Ho Ka-i in 1953 created a favorable political condition for the cult. In August 1956, a purge known as "The August Faction Incident" removed many political opponents who criticized Kim for his power concentration and personality cult, including Choe Chang Ik and Pak Chang Ok, and became a turning point for a fanatical personality cult.<sup>10</sup>

After the August Faction Incident, the North Korean government intensified the cult of Kim under the education of “revolutionary tradition” that placed Kim Il Sung’s anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle at the core of his revolutionary activities. In this regard, beginning in 1958, North Korea started constructing the Research Office for Korean Workers’ Party History all throughout the state.<sup>11</sup> This research office played a key role as a place manufacturing and promoting Kim’s anti-Japanese myths. The printing of *Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Participants’ Recollections*, whose chief purpose was to portray Kim Il Sung as the “National Liberator,” began in 1959. The guerrilla recollections were the personal stories of anti-Japanese guerrilla survivors who mostly fought with Kim Il Sung in Manchuria during the Japanese colonial period.

The institutionalization of the cult of the Kim Il Sung family became a full-fledged effort following “The Kapsan Faction Incident” in 1967. The purge of the Kapsan Faction at the Fifteenth Plenum of the Fourth Central Committee in May 1967 completely dissolved all political resistance against Kim Il Sung and became a watershed moment—not only in reinforcing the cult of Kim but also in developing the cult of the Kims.<sup>12</sup> As policy measures for the Kim cult, the party forced all North Koreans to wear a Kim Il Sung badge on their clothing, and Kim Yong Ju, who was Kim Il Sung’s younger brother and the then party organization secretary, created the Ten Principles for the Monolithic Ideological System (Ten Principles), where only Kim Il Sung’s thoughts were allowed to be accepted.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the people were compelled to quote Kim’s instructions in every organizational meeting,<sup>14</sup> and the title *suryong* was customarily employed with excessively flattering statements by the North Korean media. As specific measures for the cult of the Kim family, North Korea made a song as a tribute to Kim Il Sung’s mother, Kang Pan Sok, as the “mother of Korea”<sup>15</sup> and *Nodong sinmun* ran an article extolling Kang as the “mother of all of us” in July 1967.<sup>16</sup> In September of the same year, the Democratic Women’s League initiated the “Learning from Madame Kang Pan Sok” campaign.

Noteworthy is Kim Jong Il’s role in the development of the cult of the Kims after the Kapsan Faction Incident. Moving to the Propaganda and Agitation Department from the Organization and Guidance Department around September 1967, Kim Jong Il contributed to systematizing the family cult and changing North Korean society into a space for the cult. The Research Office of Korean Workers’ Party History was renamed the Research Office of Kim Il Sung Revolutionary History by Kim Jong Il (later renamed Research Office of Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Thought).

The year 1968 was particularly important in the development of the family cult. On Kim Jong Il’s birthday (February 16), *Nodong Sinum* ran an article designating Mangyongdae, the Pyongyang birthplace of Kim Il Sung, as “the Central Heart of 40 million Koreans” and announced a new documentary film, *Mangyongdae*.<sup>17</sup> In March, commemorating Kim Il Sung’s father, Kim Hyong Jik, the state sacralized the Ponghwa-ri of Kangdong-gun and Chunggang (near the Amnok River), where Kim Hyong Jik reportedly participated in the anti-Japanese nationalist movement in the late 1910s and early 1920s. At the twentieth state founding ceremony held in September, North Korea included Kim Il Sung’s grandparents (Kim Po-hyon and Yi Po-ik) in the cult.<sup>18</sup> Kim Il Sung’s birthday (April 15), which had been a provisional holiday since 1962, also became an official state holiday from 1968.<sup>19</sup>

To ensure the steady production of artistic works on Kim Il Sung and his family, between the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kim Jong Il established or renovated several

organizations of art and literature, including Paekdusan Production (film), April 15th Literary Production (novels), and Sea-of-Blood Opera Troupe (opera), among others.<sup>20</sup>

After being selected as his father's successor in February 1974, Kim Jong Il rewrote the Ten Principles of 1967. The new Ten Principles were much longer and more comprehensive in treating the leadership cult. The cult of Kim Chong Suk, Kim Jong Il's mother, became salient with the political rise of Kim Jong Il. In October of the same year, North Korea built a statue of and a revolutionary historical center for Kim Chong Suk in Sinpa County, where Kim Chong Suk conducted anti-Japanese underground activities in 1937.<sup>21</sup> Kim Chol Chu, one of Kim Il Sung's younger brothers, and his uncle Kim Hyong Gwon were embraced into the family cult in 1975 and 1976, respectively.<sup>22</sup>

Kim Jong Il's cult of personality became official after he publicly appeared as the political heir to his father at the Sixth Party Congress in October 1980. In 1982, Kim Jong Il's birthday (February 16), which had served as a provisional holiday since 1976, became an official state holiday,<sup>23</sup> and his first biography was published in the same year.<sup>24</sup> In a biography published in 1984, North Korea fabricated the myth that Kim Jong Il was born in a secret cabin near Mt Paekdu, not in the Russian Maritime Province, during the Great Leader's anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare efforts.<sup>25</sup> The main reason behind this fabrication was that, by linking the senior Kim's anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle to the junior Kim's birth, the state attempted to justify the dynastic succession. After the fabrication, Mt Paekdu became a central location for the cults of the father and the son. By creating several secret camps in the mountain from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, North Korea claimed that Kim Il Sung had used them between the mid-1930s and the early 1940s during his guerrilla activities. The state then mobilized annual visits to the sites by a great number of North Koreans.<sup>26</sup> In the 1980s, Kim Il Sung's great grandfather Kim Ung-u made history by being designated the leader who guided the battle against the American ship *General Sherman* in 1866.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1990s, the dynastic feature of political power became more salient in the North because the state laid more stress on the significance of the "family line" and the "bloodline" in the power succession from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il. In other words, the North emphasized that Kim Jong Il was born to be a leader because he was from a legitimate family that had sacrificed all its members for fatherland liberation and revolution. Being a descendant of the most patriotic and revolutionary family, he acquired natural superiority and deserved to rule the state. His "divine ancestry" characterized the political succession. In this period, Kim Chong Suk's younger brothers, Kim Ki Jun and Ki Song, were also added to the list of the family cult.<sup>28</sup>

The death of the Great Leader was a defining moment for the cult in the 1990s. His body was embalmed like those of Lenin and Mao Zedong. The Kumsusan Assembly Hall, in which Kim Il Sung used to live and work, was remodeled as the Kumsusan Memorial Palace. Kim's body has been preserved in the building that now serves as a central site for North Korean pilgrimages. Similar to traditional Confucian rites for the dead, Kim Jong Il forced the people to preserve a three-year mourning period for his father from July 1994 to July 1997. Since 1997, North Korea has used a reign-year *chuche* to commemorate Kim Il Sung's birth and king-like rule in a pre-modern age (*Chuche* 1 is 1912, the year he was born).

In the post-Kim Il Sung period, North Korea has identified Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Chong Suk as the “Three Great Generals of Mt Paekdu,” which symbolizes that they are not separate identities but one organic identity. North Korea also established a great number of symbols, containing the “instructions” of the three individuals, in all places that they had previously visited.<sup>29</sup>

After Kim Jong Il chose his son Kim Jong Un as his successor in late 2008 or early 2009, the North started the cult of Kim Chong Un. The North has promoted a song for the young Kim, *Palkorum (Footsteps)*, calling him “Kim *daejang* (Chief Kim).”<sup>30</sup> It is not yet known whether Kim Jong Il ordered the initiation of the cult for Chong Un’s mother, Ko Yong Hui, but the cult for Ko appears to be inevitable.<sup>31</sup>

Generally, in the post-Kim Il Sung period, the North has strengthened, not weakened, the divine character of the family. The terms referring to Kim Jong Il’s family, including the “Mangyongdae family,” the “Mangyongdae bloodline,” the “Paekdu bloodline,” and the “*chuche* bloodline,” have been employed more frequently. His family has been treated as more sacred in the state propaganda. Combined with other cult phenomena (for example, the embalmed Kim Il Sung, the three-year mourning period, the dynastic reign-year *chuche*, and the term “Three Great Generals of Mt Paekdu”), the emphasis on the family’s sacred bloodline invokes an impression that only the Kim family is entitled to appropriate political power in the North.

### The family cult as an institution

The fact that the cult of the Kim Il Sung family has been institutionalized means that, like other institutions, the cult has not only been repetitive and enduring, but also contains three key elements that an institution is supposed to have: namely, regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements.<sup>32</sup>

First, the regulative element is concerned with the function of the institution to restrain and regulate actors’ behavior. This element includes “rule-setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities.”<sup>33</sup> Regarding the cult of the Kims, North Korea has used the Ten Principles as the main legal source to control North Koreans’ activities. The principles serve to establish not only the North Korean leaders’ totalitarian rule, but also the cult of the family.<sup>34</sup> The party adopted the Ten Principles as an official regulation in 1974.

The Ten Principles have played a role as the most powerful regulation controlling the people’s daily lives in North Korea, more so than the state’s constitution or criminal law. Individuals who breach the Ten Principles are heavily penalized or sent to political re-education camps, because the violations are considered as ideologically impure. Similarly, those who damage any symbol related to the family cult are punished for violations of the Ten Principles. For example, a family who sold Kim Il Sung’s portrait on the black market to obtain food had to escape from the North in 1998 because, if they had been captured by the police, they might have been imprisoned for life.<sup>35</sup> The cult symbols are considered to be objects of divinity and are thus not allowed to be traded in a market.

Second, the normative element of the institution is generally related to how actors should do things or whether their behavior is appropriate.<sup>36</sup> In North Korea, the normative element is guaranteed by organizational education. Every member of North Korean society must belong to a certain public organization such as a

kindergarten, school, mass organization, or the party. In such organizations, individuals learn about the sacrifices made for Korea by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and their family, and their heroic efforts. They also learn how they should treat the leaders and their family members. For example, North Korean students are taught about their leaders and their families every week from kindergarten to college.<sup>37</sup> After graduating from high school or college, they enter a mass organization or the party, which facilitates their continued learning on the subject. This lifelong education inculcates the cult of the Kims in their minds.

It would be impossible to determine the exact extent to which the cult of the Kims affects North Koreans' normative behavior, but a North Korean episode demonstrates the strength of its effect: in January 2003, when there was a fire in her house, Yu Hyang Nim, who was a second-grade student at Misan Elementary School in Pyongyang, rushed into the house and sacrificed herself to save the portraits of President Kim Il Sung and General Kim Jong Il. Soldiers later found her lying down in a detached room, embracing the portraits in a blanket. To pay tribute to her loyalty to the leaders, the Kim Il Sung Boy Honorary Award was granted to Yu, and the elementary school Yu attended was renamed Yu Hyang Nim Elementary School. Yu's statue was erected at the school.<sup>38</sup>

The girl had been taught the appropriate behavior by the school, and she behaved accordingly. As shown by this episode, the normative element of the family cult strongly dictated her mentality. The state, in turn, rewarded the sacrificed girl (and most likely her family as well) and used her as a model for everyone in the exhibition of their loyalty to the leaders. Such reward methods have reinforced the normative element of the family cult.

Third, the cultural-cognitive element of the institution refers to individuals' shared meaning of the external world represented by a system of symbols.<sup>39</sup> Culture depends on symbols, which shape cultural meanings. Each society has symbols that are unique and distinguished from those of other societies. Individuals living with unique symbols shape perceptions of the world that are different from those outside of the system of the symbols. Cultural activities that repeatedly use unique symbols strengthen individuals' cognition. In other words, individuals come to a common understanding of the world through symbols and symbolic activities.

North Korea has produced a great number of symbols for the family cult—including portraits, statues, buildings, historical areas, ceremonies, rituals, and anniversaries, among others. North Koreans engage in cult activities through their daily organizational lives, which are filled with cult symbols. For example, the state regularly and irregularly mobilizes its people to visit Kim Il Sung's birthplace in Mangyongdae, Kim Jong Il's alleged birthplace in Mt Paekdu, and Kim Chong Suk's in Hoeryong, to pay tribute to the leaders. Their visits are not just tours for pleasure, but educational activities that cultivate their loyalty to the leaders. Cult activities reinforce the belief that the leaders are great and deserve their superiority and prove true what they have learned in school. The activities also create a cognitive effect through which even fabricated facts are assumed to be genuine and real. In the end, symbols and symbolic activities support and actualize an ideal world that the cult of the Kims engenders.

Although an exact measurement would be difficult, it seems that the family cult has had a dramatic impact on North Koreans' cognition. According to prior



research in South Korea, many North Korean defectors who now reside in South Korea maintained their belief that

Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were great leaders and that they could hardly erase Kim Il Sung, in particular, from their memory. In other words, they apparently continue to respect Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il even after their escape to South Korea, where the power of the two Kims does not reach.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, the effect of the family cult endured in the minds of North Korean defectors, even though they were physically separated from the cult system.

As illustrated by the above argument, the cult of the Kims has the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements of an institution and has provided stability to the society and meaning to the people. One of the reasons that the cult has been so powerful in dictating the people's behavior is that the three elements have been tightly meshed and mutually reinforcing. Given the long history of the family cult and its deep embedment in society, even if one of the three elements were to decrease its influence on the people as situations change, the cult will endure as long as the other two elements remain. For example, the persistence of North Korea's current economic crisis, which started in the mid-1990s, has likely weakened the impact of the cult's normative element on the people. However, North Korea has not reduced regulations or symbols related to the family cult. On the contrary, the role of the regulative and cultural-cognitive elements has become even more important under the economic crisis because of the declining role of the normative element. So long as the two elements properly sustain the family cult, the cult as an institution should continue to control North Koreans' behavior.

### Family cult logics

The manufactured logic behind the family cult has been directly linked to North Korea's justification of the dynastic succession from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il. As the family cult became institutionalized, the family cult logic has been developed to institutional logics. North Korea's family cult logic is very similar to Thomas Carlyle's theory of hero worship. According to Carlyle, human history is the history of what great men achieved, and the essence of world history is the history of great men's thoughts: "The history of the world is the biography of great men." People's worship of heroes shows their genuine admiration, loyalty, and adoration toward the heroes' achievements and would endure so long as human beings exist.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the North has interpreted modern Korean history by basing it on Kim Il Sung and his family's activities and claiming that their greatness has determined history. In sum, the essence of modern Korean history is what the Great Leader and his family have fulfilled. Only their revolutionary activities are *chuchejok* and legitimate, whereas those of other Korean leaders are not.

The key ingredient in the family cult logic is the "bloodline." According to the "bloodline" principle, a great family produces heroes, and a hero who is born into a great family is destined to be a leader because the greatness is transmitted to descendants through the family's bloodline. The logic finds Kim Il Sung's greatness from his family's. Its culmination is that Kim Jong Il's greatness is inherited from his father. Kim Jong Il's legitimacy has been justified through his father's greatness.

After his father passed away, Kim Jong Il made him the eternal president of the state and has ruled it under the name of his father's divine authority, which is known as *yuhun tongchi* (rule by the will of the deceased). Kim Il Sung became a more divine object in the family cult after his death.

The North has specifically produced the following family cult logics: first, the Kim Il Sung family is the "most revolutionary family with anti-imperial tradition," which is represented in the term "Mangyongdae family." The family cult originates from Kim Ung-u, Kim Il Sung's great grandfather. As mentioned above, according to the North, Kim Ung-u was involved in anti-American efforts, leading the burning assault on the *General Sherman*. Kim Po Hyon, Kim's grandfather, has been portrayed as a patriot who was defiant in the face of Japanese threats, even though he did not have an anti-Japanese career. Kim Il Sung's parents, Kim Hyong Ik and Kang Pan Sok, have also been described as anti-Japanese revolutionaries. This anti-imperial tradition has been said to be descended to the Great Leader, Kim Il Sung, who liberated colonized Korea through his anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle. The Kim family has been identified as the most patriotic family in Korea. All family members have been sacrificed on the altar of national liberation. Therefore, it follows that Kim Jong Il, who was born as a descendant of the most patriotic family, became the state's natural leader.<sup>42</sup>

Second, the Kim Il Sung family has been referred to as a "Paekdu family." This symbolizes the greatness of the family by comparing it to Mt Paekdu, the highest mountain on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>43</sup> Koreans had considered Mt Paekdu to be sacred in the pre-modern period. Many myths surround the mountain, including that of Tan'gun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation. According to the Tan'gun myth, Tan'gun founded the first Korean kingdom, Gojoseon (Old Joseon), near Mt Paekdu. Historically, Goguryeo, an ancient kingdom that had comprised the largest territory including Manchuria and northern Korea, was established near Mt Paekdu. Geographically and historically, Mt Paekdu has had important symbolic meanings to all Koreans.

In addition, North Koreans have considered Mt Paekdu a sacred "revolutionary" site because of their belief that Kim Il Sung conducted anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare on Mt Paekdu between the mid-1930s and 1945.<sup>44</sup> Kim's guerrilla struggle has been regarded in North Korea as a sanctified action because the struggle was believed to have been critical in Korea's liberation from Japanese rule. In the 1980s, when the North started fabricating Kim Jong Il's birth in a cabin near Mt Paekdu, it attempted to transfer Paekdu's holiness to Kim Jong Il's birth. This made it easier to identify Kim Il Sung's holy guerrilla activity with his son's birth because they occurred in the same place. The North currently defines Kim Jong Il's birth as the "birth of Mt Paekdu exploits' successor."<sup>45</sup>

Another logic behind the family cult is that the Kim family is a "*chongtae* (gun barrel) family," signifying a family with a strong military tradition. According to the North, Kim Hyong Jik (father), Kim Hyong Gwon (uncle), Kim Il Sung, Kim Chong Suk (wife), and Kim Chol Chu (younger brother) fought against Japan with the "gun." In the family, guns have not only represented inherited estate, but also symbolized a way of fighting to achieve political goals. Kim Hyong Jik gave two guns to Kim Il Sung, who fought to liberate the nation with the guns. Kim Chong Suk also bequeathed two guns to Kim Jong Il, who is now defending national security through his military force, known as "military-first politics." The North now



claims that the military-first politics has been devised from the family's military tradition. This military tradition of the family has been used to support Kim Jong Il's military-first politics.<sup>46</sup>

Based on the principle of family bloodline, these institutional logics—the anti-imperial revolutionary, the Paekdu, and the *chongtae* family—have provided central ideas in the institutionalization of the family cult. By giving North Koreans a framework to grasp the “meaning, appropriateness, and legitimacy”<sup>47</sup> of the cult, the logics have contributed to the stabilization and reproduction of the cult. These family cult logics, as institutional logics, have been strongly instilled in the mentality of North Koreans through public education and media propaganda.

### **Implications of the family cult for political succession**

The cult of the Kim Il Sung family has been developed to legitimize Kim Il Sung's authority and the power succession to his son Kim Jong Il. According to the North, Kim Jong Il was chosen as the Great Leader's successor, because of his following qualifications: loyalty to the Great Leader, predictive power, excellent leadership skills, proven performance, and great morality.<sup>48</sup> These successor qualifications may still apply to Kim Jong Il's political heir. The “bloodline” principle, however, is conditioning successor qualifications and is engendering a logic related to political succession in North Korea: dynastic logic. In other words, a person from a great family (bloodline) should be a North Korean leader because great leadership qualifications are handed down to descendants through the great bloodline. The logical conclusion is that the Kims, the greatest family in the North, would produce the best candidate, possessing the qualifications that Kim Jong Il has.

A dynasty is a political regime in which a royal family monopolizes political succession and political power is hereditary. The institution of heredity prevents disputes and intrigues surrounding the selection of a successor,<sup>49</sup> and determines the king by birth. It takes for granted the inequality between the royal family and others. Although North Korea does not claim that it is a dynastic regime, the more the North emphasizes the greatness of the Kim bloodline and the more clearly the family stands out through the cult, the more salient the dynastic feature is in the state. The family cult logics connect the Kims to the ruling power in the North. North Koreans are equal to one another only under the Kim family. Overly sacralizing the family's greatness limits political succession to only the dynastic succession option; that is, because no other family can reach the greatness of the Kim family, only the Kims could be legitimate possessors of state authority.

Combined with the family cult, North Korea's Confucian culture reinforces the dynastic characteristics of the state. The state's emphasis of loyalty and filial piety toward Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il reminds us of pre-modern Koreans' loyalty toward the king. Other Confucian values—*in* (benevolence) and *dok* (virtue)—have been employed to designate their leaders' fatherly love to the people in *indok chongchi* (politics of benevolent virtue), which is also similar to Confucian kingship in the Joseon Dynasty. The Confucian three-year mourning period that the North preserved from 1994 to 1997 was the epitome of Confucian rituals. All Confucian values and practices result in the reinforcement of a hierarchical relationship between the Kim family and others under the extreme cult situations.

Kim Jong Il's recent choice of his still young and inexperienced son as his political heir demonstrates that the dynastic institutional logic is working in Kim's favor. Before his final decision, he had already revealed his intention for the future of North Korea. In the meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Pyongyang in October 2000, Kim Jong Il mentioned that he was interested in the Swedish and Thai models.<sup>50</sup> Politically, Sweden and Thailand reflect a constitutional monarchy where the king represents the state. In particular, Thailand has preserved a strong royal system where the king can intervene in secular political issues to mediate political conflicts in emergency situations. At the time, his statement might have reflected his dynastic plan for future political succession.<sup>51</sup>

Kim Jong Il has been the main developer of the family cult and the dynastic succession logic. At the same time, the institutionalization of the family cult has also given Kim a favorable environment in which to choose the dynastic succession option. It may be difficult for him to abandon the dynastic logic that he himself has promoted. As with his father,<sup>52</sup> Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin through de-Stalinization campaigns after the predecessor's death may be haunting him in his preparation for his own political future. For Kim, it would be a nightmare if his heir should renounce him and dismantle the family cult after his death. He may believe that, as he is to his father, his son would be more loyal to him and his policy than any others in the state. His trust of no one but his own family members might have been the primary reason behind the recent selection of his son as his heir.

Kim Jong Il's dynastic decision also implies that his entourage agreed with it and that the entourage members were eliminated from the power succession process. As long as Kim Jong Il is alive, the institutionalization of the family cult precludes all others as a successor, and it ends power struggles among entourage members. In the Kim dynasty, the entourages and their descendants remain only as staff members to the royal family, regardless of their abilities. It is likely that the current leadership of North Korea's National Defense Commission will collectively play the role of political guardian in ensuring the Kim Jong Il–Kim Jong Un succession.<sup>53</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper has analyzed the institutionalization of the cult of the Kim Il Sung family and its implications for North Korean political succession. As with other socialist states, the person who is elected party general secretary becomes the ruler in the North. However, to understand the mechanisms behind the selection of Kim Jong Il's successor, we need to grasp the family cult and its logic because, among many political institutions in the North, the cult of the Kims is the institution that is currently engendering the dynastic logic behind the North's political succession.

The main goal of the family cult is to augment the authority of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and to justify their dynastic succession. As an institution, the cult of the Kims has retained three key elements: the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements. The Ten Principles have served to regulate any profane behaviors regarding the family cult, and the norms of the family cult have been cultivated through the lifelong education system. Combined with the regulative and normative elements, family cult symbols and related cult activities have affected North Koreans' cognition. Among the three institutional elements, while the regulative and cultural-cognitive remain strong, the normative has been weak,

because the ongoing economic crisis of North Korea has a negative impact upon the education system and its effectiveness. However, so long as the regulative and cultural-cognitive elements continue to maintain it, the cult will have an enduring effect on North Koreans' behavior as an institution.

The institutionalization of the family cult has been accompanied by institutional logics to justify the cult. The most "anti-imperial revolutionary family," the "Paekdu family," and the "*chongtae* family" are specific examples of the family cult logics. The main theme of the cult logics is the greatness of the Kim family "bloodline"; that is, the Kim family with the great bloodline has produced great leaders. Interestingly, the excessive emphasis on the family's greatness has elicited a notion that only the Kims have the right to appropriate political authority, leaving little room for others to run for and assume the leadership position. The family cult preemptively rules out the possibility of establishing fair game rules for acquiring power.

Institutions generally play a key role of restraining individual behaviors. As such, the family cult as an institution has limited Kim's choices for succession. As one of the main architects of his family's cult, he may believe that his family has the right to assert the authority to rule. If he wants to continue the cult, the best candidate may be his son. The family cult also restrains the choice of Kim's entourage. Thus far, the members of his entourage have been the beneficiaries and advocates of the cult. So long as Kim Jong Il is alive, it would be difficult for them to renounce the family cult without overthrowing the current Kim Jong Il regime. The fact that Kim chose his son as his successor indicates that his entourage members had already consented to the dynastic succession and have been excluded from the succession process.

Kim's selection, however, only reflects the completion of the selection process; it does not mean that the succession plan would proceed as smoothly as intended. As with his own succession, it would take some time for his successor to successfully consolidate and stabilize his power base. To boost their authority, Kim and his successor should resolve the pending issues currently facing North Korea, including the North Korean nuclear issue and the economic crisis. The failure of the currency reform, implemented in December 2009 to control inflation and seize the currency that North Koreans had privately stored, is also a problem that the leaders should deal with for a smooth power transition.

In spite of the restraining factors above, it is expected that North Korea will make concerted efforts to legitimize the dynastic power succession and to cultivate a positive image of Kim Chong Un. As shown in Kim Jong Il's case, it is highly possible that the government will link its policy success to the achievements of the heir apparent. For example, it will openly or furtively owe to his guidance a number of "successful" socio-political events such as the launching of the "satellite" Unha (April 2009), the nuclear test (May 2009), the 150-day speed campaign (May–September 2009), the spectacular fireworks show on Kim Il Sung's birthday (April 2010), and the sinking of the *Cheonan* (March 2010) among others. These positive evaluations will contribute to enhancing Kim Jong Un's authority, allaying the people's negative attitude toward the dynastic succession to a certain degree.

In conclusion, while Kim Jong Il is alive, he is likely to stick to the dynastic succession. His plan for the succession will continue in spite of circumstantial difficulties. The key variable for the success of his succession plan is his physical health, because his longevity determines his heir's political stability. Unexpected events related to his health or life will increase the unpredictability of the plan.

His physical disappearance will begin to test his heir's ability to rule the state and whether the family cult and its dynastic logic will endure.

## Notes

1. An Yong-hyon, "Kim Ok Who Plays a Role as Kim Jong Il's Wife Attended a Meeting between Kim and Hyon Chong-un," *Chosun Ilbo*, December 1, 2009, [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2009/12/01/2009120100100.html?srchCol=news&srchUrl=news2](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/12/01/2009120100100.html?srchCol=news&srchUrl=news2) (accessed December 2, 2009). It is known to the outside world that Kim Jong Il has three sons: Kim Chong Nam, Chong Chol, and Chong Un.
2. North Korea has not disclosed Kim Chong Un's exact age. He is known to have been born either in 1983 or 1984.
3. Chong Song-jang, "The Succession Issue of North Korea under the Kim Jong Il Era," *Korean Political Science Review* (Summer 2005): 345–65; Jae-Cheon Lim, *Kim Jong Il's Leadership of North Korea* (London: Routledge, 2009), 176–7; Ken E. Gause, "Can the North Korean Regime Survive Kim Jong Il?" *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 20, no. 2 (June 2008): 93–111; and Seung Joo Baek, "Prospects on Characteristics of the North Korean Succession System and its Foreign Policy in the Post-Kim Jong Il Era," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 20, no. 3 (September 2008): 215–30. Among these, Gause and Baek provide several succession scenarios that might unfold in North Korea's future.
4. Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms," *Political Science* 44, no. 5 (1996): 939–40; and James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (September 1984): 738–40.
5. Philip Selznick, *The MoralCommonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 232.
6. W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas and Interests*, 3rd edn (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 124.
7. Selznick, *The MoralCommonwealth*, 232.
8. B. R. Myers conducted recent research on the leaders' image-making. B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 93–127.
9. Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 1–2.
10. Ibid., 123–57; and Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945–1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
11. Cho Un-hui, "A Study of Symbolization of Revolutionary Tradition in North Korea," (Ph.D. diss., Ewha Womans University, 2007), 48.
12. Most figures who were eliminated from the party were former members of the Kapsan Operation Committee. The committee was an anti-Japanese underground organization in the mid-1930s. Kapsan is an area in the North Hamgyong Province of North Korea. Lim, *Kim Jong Il's Leadership of North Korea*, 37–42.
13. Hwang Chang-yop, *I Saw the Truth of History* (Seoul: Hanul, 1999), 149 and 173.
14. Kim Chin-gye, *Fatherland: Recollection of a North Korean Citizen*, vol. 2 (Seoul: Hyonjang munhak, 1990), 85.
15. Kim Jong Il, "On Some Problems of Broadcasting," July 30, 1967, *Kim Jong Il Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Pyongyang: Choson nodongdang chulpansa, 1992), 287.
16. Chae Chu-song, "She is the Mother of All of Us: Recollecting Madame Kang Pan-sok," *Nodong simmun*, July 31, 1967.
17. Mangyongdae is known to be the birthplace of Kim Il Sung and the place where he spent his childhood. It is located in Pyongyang.
18. Cho, *A Study of Symbolization of Revolutionary Tradition*, 58.
19. Han Yong-jin, "What does North Korea do on Kim Il Sung's Birthday?" *Daily NK* [online], April 14, 2005, <http://www.dailynk.com/korean/read.php?cataId=nk01300&num=4228> (accessed December 6, 2009).

20. Tak Jin, Kim Gang Il and Pak Hong Je, *Great Leader: Kim Jong Il*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Sorinsha, 1985), 168.
21. Sinpa County was renamed as Kim Chong Suk County in 1981. *Korean Central Yearly Book (KCYB) 1983* (Pyongyang: Korean Central News Agency, 1983), 250–2.
22. Kim Il Sung had two brothers, Chol Chu and Yong Ju: see *Invincible Revolutionary Fighter Comrade Kim Chol Chu* (Pyongyang: Choson nondongdang chulpansa, 1975); and *KCYB 1977* (Pyongyang: Korean Central News Agency, 1977), 127–8.
23. Cho, *A Study of Symbolization of Revolutionary Tradition*, 162.
24. *People's Leader*, vol. 1 (Pyongyang: Choson nodongdang chulpansa, 1982).
25. Tak Jin, Kim Gang Il and Pak Hong Je, *Kim Jong Il Leader*, vol. 1 (Pyongyang: Tongbangsa, 1984), 3–4. Kim Jong Il was actually born in the Russian Maritime Province. Lim, *Kim Jong Il's Leadership of North Korea*, 10–13.
26. *KCYB 1992* (Pyongyang: Korean Central News Agency, 1992), 179–80.
27. History Research Center of Social Sciences Institute, *Choson chonsa* 13 (Pyongyang: Sahoe kwahakwon yoksa yon'guso, 1980), 76–9.
28. Yim Yong-chol, *Child Revolutionary Comrade Kim Ki-song* (Pyongyang: Kumsong chong'yon chulpansa, 1993); and Han Chae-man, *Kim Jong Il: Individual, Thought, and Leadership* (Pyongyang: Pyongyang chulpansan, 1994), 9–26.
29. *KCYB 1995–2008* (Pyongyang: Korean Central News Agency, 1995–2008).
30. Pak Song-guk, “Disclosed Cult Song Words for Kim Chong Un, *Palkorum* (Footsteps),” *DailyNK* [online], June 2, 2009, <http://www.dailynk.com/korean/read.php?cataId=nk00100&num=72229> (accessed December 16, 2009). In 2010, the North unofficially preserved Kim Chong Un's birthday as a holiday. His birthday is January 8. Chu Song-ha, “North Koreans Who Took a Two-day Break on Kim Chong Un's Birthday,” *Dong-a Ilbo*, January 11, 2010, <http://news.donga.com/Politics/New/3/00/20100111/25321285/1&top=1> (accessed January 14, 2010).
31. Ko Yong-hui was born in Japan in 1953 and moved to the North. Kim Jong Il and Ko have two sons: Chong Chol and Chong Un; see Lim, *Kim Jong Il's Leadership of North Korea*, 101; and Fujimoto Kenji, *Kim Jong Il's Cook*, translated by Sin Hyo-won (Seoul: Wolgan Chosonsa, 2003), 135–7. In 2002, there was a source of Ko's cult, designating her as a “respected mother” and comparing Ko with Kim Jong Il's mother Kim Chong Suk. However, since then, the cult of Ko has not been systematically developed in the North: *Respected Mother is the Most Loyal of Loyal Subjects toward the Honorable Comrade Commander-in-Chief* (Pyongyang: Choson inmin'gun, 2002). This pamphlet was reprinted in the South Korean monthly magazine *Wolgan Choson*, March 2003, 120–30.
32. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, 50–9.
33. *Ibid.*, 52.
34. Lim, *Kim Jong Il's Leadership of North Korea*, 65.
35. Mun Un-hye, “Kim Il Sung's Picture Could Not Be as Important as Rice,” *DailyNK* [online], June 11, 2007, <http://www.dailynk.com/korean/read.php?cataId=nk01300&num=42116> (accessed December 7, 2009).
36. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, 54–5.
37. Hyung-chan Kim and Dong-kyu Kim, *Human Remolding in North Korea: A Social History of Education* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 195, 204, and 222.
38. Kim Un-sim, “She Was Nine Years Old,” *Choson: Hwabo*, June 2006, 15. *Choson: Hwabo* is a North Korean monthly journal.
39. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, 56–7.
40. Jae Jean Suh, *The Impact of Personality Cult in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2004), 1.
41. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Middlesex, TW: The Echo Library, 2007), 4 and 11.
42. Han, *Kim Jong Il*, 16–26; *People's Leader*, 17–24; and *The Sun of Leading, General Kim Jong Il* (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 1995), 31–4.
43. Chong Chin-hyok, *The Greatest Heroic Family* (Pyongyang: Pyongyang chulpansa, 2002), 6–21; Tak *et al.*, *Kim Jong Il Leader*, 3–8; *The Sun of Leading, General Kim Jong Il*, 25–31; and O Myong-chol, *The Son of Partisans* (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 2003), 2–13.



44. Kim had been engaged in guerrilla activity near Mt Paekdu *within* the Chinese territory between 1932 and 1940.
45. Chong, *The Greatest Heroic Family*, 18.
46. *Ibid.*, 38–49; and O, *The Son of Partisans*, 9–13 and 196–200.
47. Patricia H. Thornton and William Ocasio, “Institutional Logics and the Historical Contingency of Power in Organizations: Executive Succession in the Higher Education Publishing Industry, 1958–1990,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 3 (November 1999): 806.
48. Han, *Kim Jong Il*, 62.
49. Richard Rose, “Monarchy, Constitutional,” in *Political Philosophy: Theories, Thinkers, and Concepts*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 442.
50. Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary* (New York: Miramax Books, 2003), 466.
51. Lim, *Kim Jong Il's Leadership of North Korea*, 176–7.
52. Kim Il Sung, *With the Century*, vol. 8 (Pyongyang: Choson nodongdang chulpansa, 1999), 308–9.
53. The members of the National Defense Commission include Cho Myong Nok (1st Vice-Chairman), Yi Yong Mu, Kim Yong Chun, O Kuk Nyol (Vice-Chairmen), Chon Pyong Ho, Paek Se Bong, Chang Song Taek, Chu Sang Song, U Tong Chuk, Chu Kyu Chang, and Kim Chong Gak (Commissioners). Kim Kyong Hui, Kim Jong Il's sister, and her associates are also the main supporters of the succession.

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