North Korea's New Legacy Politics

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The king is dead, long live the king!

This proclamation is familiar in the history of European political systems. The idiom says that there are two different yet interrelated senses of life. One of them relates to what Ernest Kantorowicz calls Body Natural in his classic*The King's Two Bodies*, the human body in its physical sense that can thrive in youth but which must, when the moment comes, confront death and then the inevitable process of decomposition.[1] The other associates with Kantorowicz's Body Politic or "superbody": the body in its metaphysical sense, the life of which may continue well beyond that of Body Natural.[2] Kantorowicz explores the idea that the sovereign has two bodies—a transhistorical political body and a historical biological body—and does so as part of his investigation of medieval European philosophical and political traditions. However, similar ideas are far from unfamiliar in the history of modern politics and ideology.

When North Korea's founding leader Kim Il-sung passed away in July 1994, the country's state media claimed that this paramount leader would continue to be with his people and the country. His "physical life" was over, so it was argued, whereas his "political life" was to last eternally. The same idea was heard once again some years later, after Kim's successor, his eldest son Kim Jong-il, died in December 2011. Since then, North Korea has two former leaders each of whom has two bodies. This makes *four* bodies. Two of these bodies are embalmed and preserved in the mausoleum, Kŭmsusan Memorial Palace in Pyongyang. What about the other two bodies, the leaders' political bodies? How do these two bodies relate to each other within North Korea's political order under new leadership?

This question is pivotal to understanding North Korea's foreign policies as well as its domestic politics. The legacies of the two Kims today constitute the "supreme dignity" (*ch'oigo jonŏm*) of revolutionary North Korea, any threat to which the current political leadership considers as an act of aggression. In this postulation, meaningful foreign relations with North Korea are possible only to the extent that the dignity of these legacies is recognized (or, at least, not rejected) by the outside world.

The Leaders' Two Bodies

The two leaders' political bodies have long been together; in fact, much longer than was the case with their embalmed physical bodies. Visitors to North Korea cannot miss noticing one prominent artefact that exists in the interior space of every public office and every school classroom in the country. This artefact, the twin portrait of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, is likewise an essential item in the domestic space of every North Korean household. The portrait also exists in a miniature form, engraved on the badge which all citizens of this proud revolutionary state must wear on their shirts close to their hearts.

This double portrait art became available and popularized during the run-up to Kim Il-sung's 70th birth anniversary in 1982. It followed on from a simpler portrait, featuring Kim Il-sung's face only, which had been made available during the previous decade, around the time of Kim's 60th birthday celebration in 1972. We know that the decade of 1972 to 1982 was a crucial period in the evolution of North Korea's statehood. It was during this period that Kim Jong-il firmly established himself as the sole legitimate successor to North Korea's founding authority. This process led to what some call "the communist world's first hereditary transfer of power,"[3] and it was based on a powerful mobilization of techniques of modern revolutionary state building—literature, theatres, dramas, cinemas and mass spectacles,

which are referred to in North Korea as revolutionary art.

North Korea claims that the country's revolutionary art underwent a great leap in the 1970s under Kim Jong-il's guidance. This means that Kim Jong-il became North Korea's second-generation leader by presenting himself as the leader in the country's artistic revolution. This revolution initially focused on empowering and magnifying the authority and majesty of the country's founding leader (so in the 1970s, the leader's portrait kept in public offices or private households featured only Kim Il-sung), whereas starting from the early 1980s, it increasingly concentrated on the virtue of empowering and perpetuating the founding leader's eminent heritage; that is, the virtue whose supremacy was embodied by the then succeeding leader, Kim Jong-il. North Korea's revolutionary stateliness since at least the beginning of the 1980s is, therefore, primarily the artefact of a particular process of succession of power. This means also that the country's revolutionary identity, since the 1970s, has been based on a political revolution in a quite narrow sense, concentrated on the historical continuity of the founding sovereign authority.

The Legacy Politics, 1994–2011

The above development led to a new chapter in North Korea's political history in 1994. After Kim Il-sung's death in July of that year, North Korea launched powerful *yuhun jŏngch'i* (legacy politics, or politics according to the late leader's legacies or teachings)—the process in which the leader's life is divided into two, physical and political, and in which the political society strives to keep the leader's political life intact.[4] Since the beginning of 2012, after the country's second-generation hereditary leader passed away in December 2011, North Korea has been experiencing a new phase, and a new kind, of legacy politics.

In form, the new legacy politics since 2012 differ from the old, above all, in that they have to accommodate two separate historical legacies. As mentioned, Kim Jong-il drew his political legitimacy primarily on the imperative to keep and defend the authority of Kim Il-sung (and the entire integrity of North Korea's sovereignty that this authority embodies). His trademark post-1994 policy doctrine known as "military-first politics" was based on the idea that privileging the power of the army (over the power of the party and also, if necessary, over the integrity and needs of economic society) was necessary for the nation's sacred struggle to keep the founding leader's authority and dignity intact at a time of great crisis. This crisis was both external and internal. The disintegration of the Soviet power and the collapse of the international socialist order brought huge challenges to North Korea's political integrity; the loss of the founding leader coincided with one of the most tragic human crises in modern Korean history—North Korea's great famine in the second half of the 1990s. The famine caused unimaginable sufferings to the people of North Korea and tore apart the fabric of the society.

Kim Il-sung's supreme authority was fortunate to have turned into a historical legacy before the society was swept into the whirlwind of generalized subsistence crisis and the tragedy of mass sufferings and death. By contrast, his successor Kim Jong-il's hereditary authority began its full career with a radical crisis in the political home that the late leader had built up, which killed a countless number of this leader's "children" in North Korea's political familial ideology. Kim's military-first politics that he advanced as part of the legacy politics was, therefore, militant heritage politics whose objective was to protect the legacy of Kim Il-sung's eminent authority at a time of crisis in the political life of the leader's realm. In short, this was an epic struggle to safeguard the leader's "superbody". The late leader's legacy was supreme and all-encompassing, whereas the new leader's legacy-keeping politics were virtuous in claim, yet extremely painful to the society in practice.

From the perspective of the present, therefore, Kim Jong-il's legacy, unlike his predecessor's, is basically one of legacy politics, that is, moral historical legacy whose raison d'être was to defend the authenticity and dignity of North Korea's founding authority. His was not authentic politics, but fundamentally instrumental in character. Moreover, Kim Jong-il's legacy suffers from having dubious moral quality in the popular experience and memory: It succeeded in the objective to keep the dignity of the country's founding sovereign power; however, this success came with the high price of unimaginable human sufferings and enduring economic hardship. This duplicity of Kim Jong-il's rule appears lucidly in popular memory, in various testimonial accounts by ordinary North Koreans, including those provided by recent refugees from the country.

New Legacy Politics

How then can North Korea's current third-generation leadership relate to the proud, sovereign legacy of the first generation and the ambiguous, instrumental legacy of the second?

The answer seems, so far, to center on a certain parallelism. Kim Jong-il has become, posthumously, the eternal Chair of National Defence Commission—a powerful position in the combined hierarchy of the Workers' Party and the People's Army which he had kept during his rule (Kim Il-sung had become, after his death, the eternal supreme leader and head of state). He is honored with a song "The Great General is forever with us," just as was Kim Il-sung, after his death, with the song "The Supreme Leader is forever with us." Numerous memorial projects have been completed, which typically depict the two leaders together as the eternal guardians of revolutionary North Korea. This way, the legacies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are made to coexist in parallel with each other. The two are presented as constituting an organic whole, or at times as having different scales of significance (as in Kim Il-sung's [Korean] nation versus Kim Jong-il's Chosun [North Korea]). Recent documents define the people of North Korea as Kim Il-sung's children and as Kim Jong-il's students. The idea is that the people learned the virtue of loyalty to the founding father from his successor's exemplary filial loyalty to the deceased leader. It also means that the people must cherish this learning and, in order to do so, must eternally look up to Kim Jong-il's exemplary life.

Recent developments demonstrate another dimension to the regime's current parallel legacy politics. On March 31st, 2013, North Korea's third-generation leader, Kim Jong-un, spoke at the Workers' Party Central Committee general meeting, advocating a new paradigm of legacy politics that he called parallelism (*byungjin rosŏn*). At this important meeting, taking place while North Korea was magnifying its belligerent gestures against South Korea and the United States after having declared itself as a global nuclear power, the young leader said, "We must stick to General [Kim Jong-il]'s legacies as our primary principles unconditionally, without any divergence and without any compromises. We must actualize our General's wishes and his programs." With this note, Kim Jong-un proposed a new guideline for the Workers' Party to advance, in parallel, economic construction and the construction of further nuclear armament. He claimed that this two-pronged pursuit of nuclear power and economic prosperity was Kim Jong-il's teaching—an all-purpose, infallible theory. In doing so, the leader also made reference to a speech delivered by Kim Il-sung at the Party Central Committee meeting in 1962, saying that in this meeting Kim Il-sung first proposed the policy of integrative military and economic development. The year 1962 was, of course, when the international community was holding its breath against one of the major confrontations of the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis. For North Korea, it was around the time when the country had to confront the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea by the United States in 1958 (in blatant violation of the Korean War Armistice Agreement, in fact). It was also shortly after North Korea signed the Treaty of Friendship with China, a treaty that includes an agreement between the two countries to provide military assistance to each other should any party in the treaty face foreign military aggression.

The message is, according to an article published in the Workers' Party newspaper on April 6th, that "the principle of parallelism is our Party's new guideline. This is the strategic guideline with which we can preserve our great leaders' achievement and build an undefeatable mighty country. It is the victory-guaranteeing principle with which we can build a world's mightiest No. 1 country, people's paradise while raising high the legacies of our General [Kim Jong-il]."[5] The article argues that this co-development idea was Kim Jong-il's, although he was not able to put it into practice, it tacitly says, under the dire circumstances of the past two decades, during which the late leader pursued the policy that privileged the military instead. His unfulfilled wishes in the sphere of economic development are handed over to the new leadership after him, the article argues, and it is the supreme duty of the people of North Korea to realize the late leader's wills. In practical terms, it points out that the country's resources can now be concentrated on economic development, for the nuclear-armed North Korea has not only achieved the objective of military-first politics but has also freed the society from the economic burden caused by the military-privileging policies.

North Korea's new legacy politics today is, therefore, primarily a completion of the old legacy politics of the Kim Jong-il era. On the one hand, they advocate the new leadership's proud actualization of a mighty nuclear-armed revolutionary North Korea, the sublimation of Kim Jong-il's military-first politics. On the other hand, they aspire to

rectify the costly consequences of military-first socialism, especially on the country's socioeconomic realities. These are the two constituents of the new leadership's proclaimed policy of parallelism and the two wings of the leadership's new legacy politics. As previously mentioned, this two-pronged structural dimension of North Korea's new statehood makes a further and deeper relation with past heritages, in particular the founding leader's initiative and theory from 1962.

The Future of 1962

Facing this new chapter of North Korea's legacy politics, the country's immediate neighbours and the international community at large are deeply concerned about the consequences of a nuclear-armed North Korea. Indeed they have all the reasons to be so. In this grim situation, however, one positive element is found in the country's new legacy politics in comparison to its preceding version. The year 1962 was a critical time in Cold War history; it was a proud time for North Korea, when the country's leadership and general population, having rapidly recovered from the destitution of the Korean War, were genuinely looking forward to a better future and working hard to make this aspired future come to reality. It was when North Korea shone in the decolonizing world as an exemplary postcolonial state, fiercely independent and rapidly modernizing. The North Korean society was united with the state in a genuinely revolutionary spirit at that time, and yet undistorted by the radical charismatic politics of the following decades. The era was a genuine Kim Il-sung's North Korea, a North Korea that has long been forgotten since the powerful hereditary charismatic politics took its course in the beginning of the 1970s.

North Korea today looks as though it is determined to follow Kim Jong-il's shining legacies and to realize this leader's unfulfilled wishes. In doing so, however, it also seems to be searching for a way to move beyond the dark side of this leader's ambiguous, painful legacies. The year 2012 was the all-important 100th birth anniversary of North Korea's founding father. The seeds of North Korea's radical difficulties that we witness today were sown in between this leader's 60th and 70th anniversaries. Kim Il-sung did not celebrate his 50th birthday in 1962 as pompously as his 60th or 70th birthdays. He did not need to, for the country's political process was not yet twisted by the so-called artistic revolution of the 1970s, through which politics became more about manipulating symbols and unleashing pompous theatrics than confronting urgent socioeconomic realities. Now, with the master of the art revolution gone, North Korea should be free to recover its long-lost statehood that existed before the onset of hereditary charismatic politics. This recovery is necessary for parting with the era of military-first socialism and with its disastrous legacy.

North Korea's viable future, for the moment, depends on how creatively it brings its sovereign heritage before the 1970s to the fore. It also depends on how it can leave the past legacy politics of 1994–2011 behind.

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[1] Ernest H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

[2] Ibid, 4, 7–23.

[3] "North Korea Confirms Kim Jong-Il's Son Will Take Over as Leader," *Guardian*, October 8, 2010.

[4] Heonik Kwon, "North Korea's Politics of Longing," *Critical Asian Studies* 42 (2010): 3–24.

[5] "Let's Realize Great General's Legacies," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 6, 2013.

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