

ASIA PACIFIC | MEMO FROM SOUTH KOREA

To Sell a New Leader, North Korea Finds a Mirror Is Handy

By CHOE SANG-HUN FEB. 1, 2012

SEOUL, South Korea — When Kim Jong-un made his debut as the North Korean heir apparent in September 2010, he looked so much like his grandfather, the closest thing North Koreans had to a god, that South Korean intelligence officials noted that many North Koreans who saw the young man for the first time on television broke down in tears.

“The regime wants its people to see Kim Jong-un as Great Leader Kim Il-sung reincarnated,” said Kim Kwang-in, head of the North Korea Strategy Center, a research organization based in Seoul that collects information from sources inside North Korea. “They fattened him up and gave him a thorough training — and plastic surgery, too, some even say — to make him look just like his grandfather.”

Since his elevation to leader after the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, in December, Kim Jong-un has been presenting himself as a near replica of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung — from the way he clapped his hands, walked with shoulders thrown back and stood tall with a paunch, down to such details as his double-breasted greatcoat, high-trimmed sideburns, double chin and full cheeks.

The packaging of Mr. Kim as the embodiment of the North’s widely revered founding president suggests that a well-oiled machine is at work to create a new

leader. The strategy of having Mr. Kim assume his grandfather's persona, and relying on nostalgia for the "Great Leader" to justify and consolidate his dynastic succession, reflects the slightness of the young leader's own résumé, as well as the length of his grandfather's and father's shadows, under which he must rule.

It also suggests a note of desperation among the nomenklatura, who know that their own privileged positions depend on the survival of the Kim dynasty. Whether it will work or not remains an open question.

More immediately, there is fevered speculation here about what kind of leader he will make — a figurehead, another Kim Jong-il or a North Korean Deng Xiaoping.

"When North Koreans see Kim Jong-un, they think of Kim Il-sung when he was 33," said An Chan-il, a former North Korean Army officer.

Mr. An, 57, was referring to 1945, when Kim Il-sung, a guerrilla leader fighting for Korean independence, entered Pyongyang at the end of Japanese colonial rule, casting himself as the smiling liberator. In reality, it was the Americans and the Soviets who liberated Korea from Japan and divided it between them.

"After the hardship of recent years, North Koreans yearn for another liberator," said Mr. An, who defected to the South in 1979 and worked as a government analyst in Seoul before opening his own research group, the World Institute for North Korea Studies, in 2010.

Kim Jong-il was a master propagandist who directed several movies. His last work may have been casting Kim Jong-un as a successor who inherited his father's policy but his grandfather's face. It was a role that Kim Jong-il knew he could never play. He indicated that his homely, pear-shaped looks were loathed by many North Koreans (he once called himself "an ugly midget"), according to South Koreans who met him.

Since Kim Jong-il's death, the North Korean state news media have vowed that Kim Jong-un will faithfully follow his father's songun, or "military first," policy. That approach gives top priority for resource allocations to the military, a linchpin in the father's, and now the son's, efforts to maintain internal unity.

But Kim Jong-il's 17-year rule was marked by floods, drought, mass starvation and deepening international sanctions in response to his nuclear weapons program. In public, he often looked dour and aloof. Groveling generals kept a deferential distance from him. Few ordinary North Koreans ever heard him speak.

By contrast, Kim Jong-un is striking a confident posture that recalls his grandfather, who is often depicted in North Korean textbooks and murals as a leader surrounded by children and workers. Mr. Kim's youthful visage as a new nation-builder came as the regime was promising its long-suffering people "a strong and prosperous nation."

Grinning, sampling soup in a school kitchen, linking arms with workers, clambering onto a tank with soldiers, embracing young pilots rushing to his chest in tears and pulling weathered army generals closer to give them words of advice, Kim Jong-un looks at home in his new role as the national eobeoi, or "parent," as his grandfather and ancient Korean kings were regarded by their subjects.

But things in Pyongyang may not be proceeding as smoothly as they appear.

Kim Jong-un, who is believed to be in his late 20s, has an influential uncle, Jang Song-taek. Mr. Jang serves as Mr. Kim's mentor, but his ambitions beyond that are shrouded in mystery.

Mr. Kim also has a half brother, Kim Jong-nam, who is living in semi-exile in China and is talking regularly to journalists from Japan, North Korea's sworn enemy, to predict doom for his half brother's rule. His daring criticism of Kim Jong-un fueled speculation that China and certain generals in Pyongyang might be protecting him as a hedge should things go wrong with Kim Jong-un's succession. Officially, Beijing has voiced support for Kim Jong-un.

Cheong Seong-chang, an analyst at the Sejong Institute, said he believed that Kim Jong-un had already established himself solidly as successor before his father's death. The generals whom his mother, Ko Young-hee, helped promote before her death in 2004 stood behind him, Mr. Cheong said. But others believe that Mr. Kim remains little more than a figurehead, with the real power belonging to his uncle, Mr. Jang.

If anything, Mr. Kim appears for now to be a figurehead for his dead grandfather and father, many analysts say. In the hybrid Stalinist-Confucian dynasty that his grandfather and father created, he is presented as having a divine right to rule because of his blood ties to Kim Il-sung. That also means that he can risk his own legitimacy as leader if he rejects his father's policies and attempts to introduce radical changes. That same fear haunts the elite, whose vested interests, rooted in their ties to the Kim family, are also conferred by heredity.

That goes a long way toward explaining why the regime has lost no time raising the profile of the young Mr. Kim. Since his father's funeral, he has visited one military unit every four or five days, casting himself as a caring and competent commander and highlighting perhaps his single most important qualification as leader, that he looks more like his grandfather than his unpopular father.

"It looks as if the DNA jumped from grandfather to grandson, skipping the father," said Lee Yun-keol, a North Korean biologist who defected to the South in 2006 and now leads the North Korea Strategic Information Service Center, a private research organization. "So we have a new leader who looks just like his grandpa. But that doesn't change much in the North."

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