

Kim Jong Il: Playing a poor hand skillfully

(CNN) --Until he made a surprise appearance when he greeted visiting South Korean President Kim Dae-jung at Pyongyang airport in June 2000, the personality and character of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il had been dominated by propaganda and rumor.

The reclusive communist leader has been portrayed variously as an unstable nuclear-armed madman and a cognac-swilling playboy serviced by a team of women known as the "Pleasure Squad."

He has a taste for the high life that knows few bounds, extending to a fondness for fast cars and fine dining -- **even while most of his country teeters on the brink of starvation.**

One recent account, by Russian official Konstantin Pulikovsky who accompanied Kim on a train journey across Russia, described how live lobsters and roasted donkey -- reportedly the North Korean leader's favorite food -- were flown out to supply the train on a daily basis.

But despite such extravagance Kim Jong Il generally prefers to keep a low profile.

His televised appearances are largely confined to **carefully choreographed official visits to prestigious public works projects or large-scale ceremonies**, accompanied by an entourage of approving advisors.

So how did one man come to achieve such extraordinary privilege and become the focus of perhaps the ultimate personality cult?

Sacred birthplace

North Korea gives Kim's official birthplace as sacred Mount Paektu, the highest point on the Korean peninsula.

The peak, on the northern border with Chinese Manchuria, is and the site where according to legend says the Korean nation came into existence 5,000 years ago.

"At the time of his birth there were flashes of lightning and thunder, the iceberg in the pond on Mount Paektu emitted a mysterious sound as it broke, and bright double rainbows rose up," according to the official line.

Researchers who are more objective place Kim's birth in the Far Eastern region of the Soviet Union on February 16, 1942.

His father, Kim Il Sung, fled to the Soviet Union when the Japanese put a price on his head for guerrilla activities in occupied Korea.

The family returned to the northern part of the peninsula after Japan's surrender at the end of World War II, and **Soviet dictator Josef Stalin anointed Kim Il Sung as the leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.**

Kim Jong Il's younger brother drowned as a child and his mother died when he was seven years old.

Shortly after, in 1950, the Korean War broke out when the North launched a surprise attack on the U.S.-backed South aimed at creating a unified, communist Korean peninsula.

Kim was sent to Manchuria, not returning to Korea until three years later when the war ended.

Despite the hardships suffered by most Koreans during the bitter years of war and its aftermath, Kim Jong Il was presumably surrounded by luxury and privilege throughout most of his childhood.

Little was heard of him however until 1980 when Kim Il Sung formally designated his son as his successor.

The junior Kim was given senior posts in the Politburo, the Military Commission and the Party Secretariat.

He took on the title "Dear Leader" *and the government began spinning a personality cult around him patterned after that of his father, the "Great Leader."*

Newly empowered Kim was suspected by many of ordering two bombings by North Korean agents.

One in 1983 in the Burmese capital Rangoon -- now known as Yangon -- killed 17 visiting South Korean officials, including four cabinet members. Another blast in 1987 killed all 115 on board a South Korean airliner.

No evidence directly links Kim Jong Il to the bombings, however, and some analysts believe his father was still firmly in control of international activities throughout the 1980s, while giving his son more power over domestic affairs.

In 1991, Kim Jong Il became commander-in-chief of North Korea's powerful armed forces, the final step in the long grooming process.

Three years later, when Kim Il Sung died suddenly from a heart attack at 82, most outsiders predicted the imminent collapse of North Korea. **The nation had lost its venerated founding father.**

Just a few years earlier, its powerful alliances had evaporated with the fall of the Soviet bloc and China's move toward a market-based system. The economy was on the rocks and energy and food were in short supply.

Mass starvation

A series of weather disasters, combined with an inefficient state-run agricultural system, further eroded the food supply, leading to mass starvation.

The timing could not have been worse for replacing the only leader North Korea had known.

After his father's elaborate public funeral, Kim Jong Il dropped out of sight but soon managed to consolidate power.

Under his newly organized government, Kim's deceased father was deemed "**eternal leader**" and the **presidential post left unclaimed.**

Instead, the junior Kim took the titles of general secretary of the Workers Party and chairman of the National Defense Commission -- a group of 10 men that includes the heads of the air force, army and navy, who are now considered the most powerful in the country.

Kim Il Sung's unique style of Stalinism, suffused with the Korean "juche" philosophy (roughly translated as "self reliance"), was subordinated to the more militant theme of Kim Jong Il's "Red Banner" policy, introduced in 1996.

The changes afoot were dramatically illustrated in 1997 by the defection of Hwang Jang Yop -- the architect of the juche philosophy and the first high-level official to seek asylum in South Korea.

Hwang, who was 74 at the time, had been a key figure in the Pyongyang government -- a member of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly. He was also Kim Jong Il's mentor, taking charge of his education when he was a student at Kim Il-sung University and serving as his confidant.

It appears that Hwang's influence had waned considerably and that he was on the verge of forced retirement when he fled, leaving a wife and three children behind.

In a news conference after his defection, Hwang warned of a growing possibility that his homeland might launch an attack. "The preparation for war exceeds your imagination," he said.

Hwang described **Kim Jong Il as a strong-willed dictator who is short-tempered and ruthless when it comes to punishing anyone who questions his policies.**

Many outsiders viewed the flight of Hwang as another sign that the North Korean regime was on its last legs, but once again it weathered the storm, perhaps even benefiting from the fears of war heightened by Hwang's warning.

Despite sending a test missile over Japan in June 1999 and other such incidents, North Korea under Kim Jong Il also has sent signals that it is open to new alliances after decades of isolation.

Billions of dollars in international aid has poured into North Korea, which has had to do little in return.

Many analysts conclude that Kim Jong Il has played a poor hand of cards skillfully.

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<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/13/bio.kim.jongil>

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North Korea – Foundations

Regime: the period during which a particular government or ruling system is in power.

Cult of personality: A cult of personality or personality cult arises when a country's leader uses mass media to create a larger-than-life public image through unquestioning flattery and praise.

Your task: To help *further your understanding* jot down some notes *in your own words* that better define – for you – the information presented in this article. **If you *just* write down lines from the article you have *failed* to successfully complete your task!**

1) If you were going to Define ‘cult of personality’ in your own words to an ALIEN, what would that definition look like?

2) After reading the first seven paragraphs of this article (first section) what are your impressions of Kim Jong-Il -> Would you want him to lead your country? How do you think he gets away with behaving this way? Etc...

3) How was Kim’s family placed in power? What troubles did they have to overcome?

4) How was Kim Jong-Il able to preserve power in N. Korea? (Follow the arrows!) How did the “cult of personality” play a role in this?

5) Describe how Kim Jong-Il rules over his country. How does it differ from your response in question #1 – what if anything changed?

6) Do you agree with the last line of the article saying that “Kim Jong-Il has played a poor hand of cards skillfully”? How has he played the hand skillfully, or not?