

Intelligence in Public Media

Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator

Jong Un Pak (Random House, 2020), 317 pages, map illustrations, map, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Joseph W. Gartin

If timing is everything, the publication of Dr. Jung H. Pak's *Becoming Kim Jong Un* in April 2020 could hardly have been more propitious. Indeed, it looked for a time that it would become the go-to reference for obituary writers as the North Korean leader disappeared from public view that month amid reports he was gravely ill or perhaps even dead. When Kim emerged on May 2, 2020 for the opening of a fertilizer plant, looking cheerful and portly and completely alive—the kind of performative leadership appearance that is a staple of the seven-decade Kim family dynasty—many commentators fell back on clichés. Kim is a pampered, idiosyncratic, and ruthless leader, overseeing a vast if underfed army and a growing arsenal of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles that threaten South Korea, Japan, and the United States. His disappearance from public view was just another example of his reclusive and enigmatic rule.

Getting beyond these tropes to craft a more nuanced and objective view of Kim Jong Un is the goal of Pak's book. She brings an impressive resume to the task. Born in South Korea, Pak came to the United States as a child, earned a PhD in Korean studies from Columbia University, and studied in South Korea as a Fulbright Scholar. Pak then joined the Central Intelligence Agency, where she would serve as one of the Intelligence Community's foremost experts on North Korea, the Kim family, and its unique brand of autocracy wrapped in the rhetoric of socialism and self-reliance. After leaving CIA to become chair of the Korea program at the Brookings Institution, Pak joined the Biden administration as a deputy secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs.

For this reviewer, Pak's book has special relevance. I served in CIA's precursor to today's Korea Mission Center for most of the 1990s, including in 1994 when North Korea state news announced President Kim Il Sung had died after five decades of iron rule. Every Korea-watcher from Seoul to Washington was fixated on the stability of the new regime led by Kim Il Sung's loyal if unprepossessing son Kim Jong Il. When Pyongyang

announced in December 2011 that Kim Jong Il had died of a heart attack, I was beginning a four-year stint as vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC). Once again, the Intelligence Community would be focused on the unique hereditary succession dynamics of the Kim regime, this time without the decades-long effort of propaganda and purges that had paved the way for Kim Jong Il. Pyongyang's advancing nuclear and missile programs, obsolescent but lethal conventional forces, and brittle economy compounded concerns over the risk of instability. It was in this milieu that the NIC created a National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for North Korea and hired Dr. Pak as deputy NIO.

Pak's deep expertise, fluent Korean, and IC leadership made her indispensable in crafting the intelligence assessments that informed US policy discussions about how to deal with Kim Jong Un, and she employs these same skills to good effect in *Becoming Kim Jong Un*. Pak guides the reader briskly but competently through Kim Chong Il's tangle of wives and mistresses, Kim family intrigue, and Kim Jong Un's privileged upbringing. Like his half-brothers and half-sister, Jong Un was raised in luxury in Pyongyang, and he later was sent to study in Switzerland while the North suffered through the economic dislocation of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991—Moscow had long propped up the regime with cash, weapons, and oil—and the largely man-made famine of the 1990s.

For average North Koreans, it was a grim period. Pak observes:

Corpses piled up near train stations; roving bands of starving orphans stole what they could or collapsed when they couldn't find anything; women turned to prostitution in an attempt to survive and feed their families. People of all ages . . . foraged in the woods to find roots, mushrooms, and other wild plants, often with tragic consequences. . . . People ate garbage, rats, frogs. (55)

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Pak details Kim Jong Un's return in 2001 from Europe to a country beset by economic collapse, growing military obsolescence, and tensions with its neighbors and foes alike. It must have been a jarring contrast, she notes, from his life in Switzerland, protected as he was from the privations facing most of the country. (57) Kim Jong Un's preparation to succeed his father, who was increasingly frail as the decade wore on, unfolded against the backdrop of al-Qa'ida's attacks on the United States, US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and increasing US pressure on the Kim regime. Private markets emerged in fits and starts to ease shortages, but the regime remained quick to crack down whenever it sensed entrepreneurship might turn into anti-dynastic sentiment. And while the multi-lateral talks known as the Six-Party Talks resulted in a joint statement in 2005 promising a reduction in tensions and end to the North's nuclear weapons ambitions, the following year Pyongyang tested a nuclear device. New ballistic missiles and more nuclear tests would follow. (67) The rest of the decade would be filled with the familiar cycle of negotiations, sanctions, provocations, and more negotiations that have long marked North Korea relations.

When Kim Chong Il died in December 2011, the regime put the transition machinery into high gear. With characteristic rhetorical flourishes, state media called on "the whole Party, the entire army, and all the people" to become "human shields in defending Kim Jong Un to the death." (73) He appeared determined to lead North Korea in his own way. Pak observes, "during those tense years, we started to talk about the 'new normal'—in which we saw ballistic missile tests almost every two weeks and heard sustained, alarming rhetoric that most veteran watchers of North Korea agreed was the worst observed in twenty years." (81)

Kim spent much of the decade fleshing out his vision for North Korea as a kind of technocratic, nuclear-capable, socialist dynasty, modern yet isolated, that despite its inherent contradictions could stand toe to toe with its allies and adversaries. Pak argues that Jong Un made progress in advancing "both the economy and the nuclear weapons program, building monuments of leisure and monuments for national defense, and seemingly ushering in a new and modern North Korea after decades of decline." (154) As the decade came to an end, he would score other high-profile successes with his high-stakes

meetings beginning in 2018 with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, (179) Chinese President Xi Jinping and—most historically significant—President Donald Trump. As Pak notes, "Kim would get what his grandfather and his father were never able to obtain—a meeting with a sitting US president." (202) Kim also demonstrated the kind of ruthless pruning of the family tree that has sustained the Kim dynasty since 1945, most dramatically by publicly executing his powerful uncle Jang Song Taek (104) and authorizing the murder of his half-brother Kim Jong Nam (145) in a brazen nerve-gas attack in the Kuala Lumpur airport.

Pak's book succeeds in giving the reader a greater understanding of Kim Jong Un as the product of a unique dynastic regime and his own ambitions, along with casting some light into the shadows of one of the hardest of hard targets. *Becoming Kim Jong Un* also pulls back the curtain on analytic tradecraft, as Pak invokes intelligence pioneers like Richards Heuer^a (118) to examine her sources of information and the logic behind her judgments. At times, however, both bump up against the firewalls of secrecy and uncertainty, and Pak resorts to assertions in the absence of ground truth. "Perhaps," she speculates, "Jong Un hated his brother—Westernized, gluttonous, corrupted—for what he represented." (149) Writing about Kim Jong Un's motivations for a cyber-attack on Sony Pictures Entertainment in 2014, Pak suggests "Perhaps exposing the regime's propaganda of Kim's godlike status and its farcical claims that North Korea was a land of prosperity hit too close to home." (129) Perhaps is a probabilistic coin toss; something might or might not be the case. Better to say we simply do not know.

A year on from publishing *Becoming Kim Jong Un*, Pak is now on the policymaker side of the intelligence-customer divide, and Korea watchers are still challenged to predict Kim's actions and divine his motives. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, his frequent weeks-long disappearances from public view remain as newsworthy as they are unexplained. When he does appear, typically to exhort Korean Workers Party bureaucrats to improve living conditions or to showcase Pyongyang's military capabilities, experts dissect every word and gesture. For anyone trying to understand what makes Kim tick on the basis of such fragmentary information, Pak's book is an invaluable companion.



The reviewer: Joseph Gartin retired from CIA as its chief learning officer. He recently joined the Studies Editorial Team.

a. Richards Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999).