

Intelligence in Public Media

The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un

Anna Fifield (PublicAffairs, 2019), 336 pp., notes, index.

Le monde selon Kim Jong-un: Guerre ou paix? [The World According to Kim Jong-un: War or Peace?]

Juliette Morillot and Dorian Malovic (Robert Laffont, 2018), 270 pp.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado

Leadership analysis is the assessment of leaders and their environments, of an individual's character and the surrounding political, economic, and military factors driving, constraining, or enabling a leader's actions. Superior intelligence analysts, journalists, or researchers must gather key information, analyze the findings, and report their conclusions clearly to their audiences, whether in classified briefings to senior policymakers or by published works to the public. The journalist Anna Fifield in her recent book on Pyongyang's young leader does well in gathering information and ends her work with some solid analysis, but she exasperates this reader with mocking, contemptuous language better suited to propaganda than analysis.

Bureau chief in Beijing for the *Washington Post* since last year, Fifield is a veteran journalist, who has written for many years on Korean affairs, including in her time as foreign correspondent in Seoul for the *Financial Times* (2004–2008) and as bureau chief in Tokyo for the *Washington Post* (2014–18). She is a fine example of the reporter who wears out a great deal of shoe leather in pursuit of a story. She has visited Pyongyang multiple times; interviewed in the Japanese Alps the extraordinary Fujimoto Kenji,^[1] for several years father Kim Jong Il's personal sushi chef and a font of information on the Kim clan;^[2] visited Switzerland for the story of the young leader's European schooling; interviewed in the United States his aunt, Ko Yong Suk; and met in a number of countries with many refugees from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The book benefits a great deal from Japanese and Korean acquaintances and assistant reporters who helped Fifield by conducting research and translating material found in such sources as the memoir of a Kim clan member who defected to the West; a book by one of Japanese journalism's leading Pyongyang hands; and the memoir of Russian President Putin's representative in the Russian Far East, who rode the rails with Kim Jong Il for a bilateral summit in Moscow.^[3] Fifield's network gave her "invaluable research and translation help," as she wrote in her book's acknowledgments section. Indeed, the Japanese, Korean, and Russian texts she mined, along with information from more accessible works in English, arguably yielded more treasure than all her trips to Pyongyang and refugee interviews.^[4]

Having gathered such impressive information, Fifield wrote a book divided into 16 chapters grouped under three headings—"The Apprenticeship," "The Consolidation," and "The

Confidence”—tracing Kim Jong Un’s early life, his coming to power at the age of 27 following his father’s death in 2011, and his unexpectedly rapid moves since then to consolidate his position and act upon the world stage. Pyongyang watchers and general readers alike will find interest in the details of his basketball-obsessed childhood years in Switzerland; his elimination of his uncle Jang Song Thaek and half-brother Kim Jong Nam, both threats to regime stability because of their connections to Beijing and, allegedly, in Kim’s case, Washington.^[5] Fifield also offers such spectacles as the young leader enjoying in Pyongyang the company of a colorful former star of the NBA’s Chicago Bulls, and such serious issues as the regime’s growing capabilities in nuclear and cyber warfare.

In the end, Fifield marshals some solid conclusions on Kim Jong Un and his regime. She quotes a senior CIA official who credits Kim with a “clarity of purpose” for developing weapons of mass destruction. She herself concludes that Kim is intent on preserving the country against a much stronger United States through the time-tested strategy of mutual assured destruction. Ringing true is her argument that Kim agreed to summit talks with President Trump not simply due to Washington’s “maximum pressure” campaign but because the young leader had first laid the necessary diplomatic (rapprochement with Beijing) and military (the nuclear and missile programs) groundwork necessary for fruitful negotiations.

The author errs in a couple instances. One is in suggesting that terror alone has kept the Kim clan in place and the DPRK’s people in submission. The other is that the regime is inherently incapable of undertaking bold economic reform without bringing down the political house. As to the first idea, the security services and prison camps certainly play a role in regime stability. However, with the decades-old Korean civil war between North and South still unsettled, the threat from the stronger Republic of Korea (ROK) south of the DMZ appears to be the greatest prop to the dictatorship in Pyongyang. The authorities even today cannot have forgotten the arrests and executions that followed the advance of ROK forces north into the DPRK several months into the Korean War. Nor can anyone in Pyongyang expect a happy future for themselves if the South should succeed in taking over the North. Rather than scenes of Koreans dashing joyously south across the DMZ, as Germans crossed into West Berlin when the Wall came down, we are likely to witness Seoul sealing the borders.^[6] As for bold economic reform, even Beijing and Hanoi, peers to which Fifield unfavorably compares Pyongyang, only opted for fundamental opening and change after winning their own civil wars.

Perhaps worse than any error, however, is how the author mars her hard work and solid conclusions by resorting to a sneering tone more suited to propaganda than analysis. She writes of Kim as a “puzzling potentate,” of his “coronation” as a “young emperor” following “anointment” by his father. She mocks the outpouring of grief among the Koreans lining the route of the funeral procession in Pyongyang as “Korean soap opera crossed with Latin American telenovela with a heavy dollop of bizarre.” Many of the snide remarks are not only gratuitous, but contradictory. She judges the nuclear program to be a rational deterrent but then describes it as Kim’s “security blanket.” Elsewhere, she derides the “absurdity” of Kim’s protective service members running alongside his armored limousine while also noting that the Koreans adopted the practice from the US Secret Service. Did the author or her publisher think that ridicule would sell more copies than analysis? The book’s very cover is a cartoon portrait of Kim.^[7]

Another point of view

Across the Atlantic, French journalists Juliette Morillot and Dorian Malovic present a more sober

and accurate portrait of Kim Jong Un's Korea. Like Fifield, the two have expended much shoe leather in three decades of research and writing, with many trips to the two Koreas as well as to China, Japan, Russia, and Southeast Asia, to speak with DPRK officials and refugees.^[8] In their book, the two cover much the same ground as Fifield, from economic changes to the development of nuclear weapons. Whereas Fifield writes of Pyongyang's growth but denigrates the nation's capital as a "Potemkin village," Morillot and Malovic inform us that development there is real and is also visible in the provincial capitals. Fifield repeats the notion, common in the West, of an official blackout of foreign information. The French journalists inform us that the DPRK has five television stations, with frequent broadcasts of films from China and Russia, as well as from France, Germany, and elsewhere, along with televised international sports matches and other foreign news. By coincidence, both books mention Pak Chol In, manager of the March 26 Electric Cable Factory. Fifield neglects to name him or offer details of the site but writes of his having gained weight as the factory has prospered in recent years. Morillot and Malovic name Pak and report a number of details concerning the factory. Let us hope an American publisher discovers this book and publishes it in English.

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The reviewer. Stephen C. Mercado recently retired from a career spent in the DNI's Open Source Enterprise and its predecessors, including the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, where he worked on Asian issues via media published in several languages. He has written often on contemporary and historical issues in Asian intelligence, including several previous articles and book reviews on North Korea for this journal.

Footnotes

[1] All Japanese and Korean names appear in traditional order, with family name preceding given name.

[2] It was Fujimoto who said in an interview published 15 years ago that Kim Jong Il would choose Jong Un over elder brother Jong Chol. Many Pyongyang watchers then and much later assumed that the youngest son of Kim Jong Il had little chance of coming to power in a nation so steeped in Confucian culture's preference for the elder over the younger. See *Kitachosen: Kin Seinichi okake sushi shokunin no shinshogen* [North Korea: New Testimony of Kim Jong Il's Sushi Chef], *Aera*, 26 July 2004, 70–71. Fujimoto has written several extraordinary insider books on the Kim clan. Three draw on his years as the family's sushi chef, relating various episodes, adding ground photos of leadership villas, and providing the West with the first photograph of Kim Jong Un: *Kin Seinichi no Ryorinin* [Kim Jong Il's Chef] (2003); *Kin Seinichi no Shiseikatsu* [Kim Jong Il's Private Life] (2004); and *Kaku to Onna wo aishita Shogun-sama* [The General Who Loved Nukes and Women] (2006). Fujimoto later wrote of Kim Jong Un's new regime in a book describing his return to Pyongyang in 2012 to beg forgiveness for leaving without permission years earlier: *Hikisakareta Yakusoku* [Torn-Up Promise] (2012).

[3] I refer to Song Hye Rang's *Dungnamujip* [Wisteria House] (2000), Gomi Yoji's *Onna ga ugokasu*

Kitachosen [Women Who Move North Korea] (2016), Konstantin Pulikovskiy's *Vostochnyy ekspress*, and Po Rosii s *Kim Chen Irom* [Oriental Express: Journey through Russia with Kim Jong Il] (2002). One of Fifield's helpers almost certainly mined information from the 2003 Korean translation of Pulikovskiy's book.

[4] Document exploitation often trumps direct observation. An earlier example comes from Beijing. Claude Martin, French ambassador to China (1990–93) wrote in his memoir that, on arriving in Beijing in 1964 as a cultural attaché, he discovered to his surprise that his embassy, the first from the West to operate behind the Bamboo Curtain, gained most of its information not from its presence on the ground but from the weekly arrival from Hong Kong of translated Chinese radio broadcasts monitored by the “special services” of the United States, Britain, and the Republic of China (Taiwan). See *La diplomatie n'est pas un dîner de gala* (2018), 59.

[5] Fifield asserts, without offering evidence, that Kim Jong Nam was an “informant” of the Central Intelligence Agency, which, if true and reported to Pyongyang, could have been the reason for his killing.

[6] German politicians who visited Seoul in 2011 to offer lessons from their own country's unification learned of the South's intent to seal the North's population in place after a takeover. Said one German: “The South Koreans were talking about border controls. I'll be damned! They seriously intend to close the border after the wall has fallen!” “Germans Give Pep Talks on Korean Unification,” *Spiegel Online*, 6 January 2012 (<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/seoul-searching-germans-give-pep-taks-on-korean-unification-a-807123.html>, accessed 25 July 2019).

[7] Interestingly, Fifield's British publisher opted not for the cartoon but a cover photograph showing Kim and several military officers in the field. The British also chose a more sober subtitle: *The Secret Rise and Rule of Kim Jong Un*.

[8] Morillot speaks Korean, and Malovic Chinese, which has allowed them to meet DPRK refugees without relying, as other journalists have done, on ROK intermediaries and interpreters to make introductions for them and interpret the refugee testimonies.

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