

## *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-Il: Notes from His Former Mentor*

John H. Cha with K. J. Sohn, (Abbott Press, 2012), 175 pp.

### **Reviewed by Soo Kim**

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Long shrouded in mystery and subject to strict control of information, North Korea intrigues many scholars, and its workings remain largely an uncracked code for policymakers. Of particular interest to outsiders have been Pyongyang's eccentric leaders, the late Kim Jong-Il and his successor Kim Jong-Un.<sup>1</sup> John H. Cha and K.J. Sohn's work, *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-Il*, traces the life of the former leader from birth to death. It attempts to do so in a novel way, purporting to follow Kim's development through the eyes of Hwang Jang-yop, Kim's former mentor, the highest-ranking North Korean defector, and originator of the North's *juche* (self-reliance) philosophy. Hwang, by virtue of his lengthy, high-profile access to the North Korean leaders and his expertise in Pyongyang's ideology, is an authoritative voice providing insight into the workings of the country and the sentiments of the North Korean people.

The book's biographical sketch of Kim Jong-Il is presented within a fairly comprehensive historical and political context. As a result, it offers readers a holistic understanding of North Korea, and thus it is, at a minimum, useful reading for those interested in a quick history of the country or a closer look at Kim's personality. A flaw, however, is that although the book claims to be told from Hwang Jang-yop's vantage point, in fact, the narrative is in Cha's voice, making it difficult to distinguish Hwang's insights from Cha's interpretations and analyses.

Cha is a biographer who has written several books on Korean leaders and translated Korean literature into English. K.J. (Kwang-joo) Sohn is the editor in chief of the Seoul-based online journal *DailyNK*, which reports on current issues related to North Korea. *DailyNK* gets its material from a network of informants in

the North, who communicate with Chinese cell phones from along the North Korea-China border; it also reports on North Korean defectors and escapees. Prior to his time at *DailyNK*, Sohn worked as a research fellow at South Korea's National Intelligence Service and served as Hwang Jang-yop's secretary when Hwang defected to the South in 1997. *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-Il* combines Cha's biography writing expertise with Sohn's access to Hwang, other North Korean defectors, and insiders with knowledge of Pyongyang's leadership and politics.

Cha sets the tone for the book in the first chapter with a discussion of the 2000 inter-Korean summit between Kim Jong-Il and South Korea's President Kim Dae-jung. The description of the event provides context for the current situation in North Korea, but more importantly, it sheds light on Kim Jong-Il's character as seen through Hwang's eyes. It also contrasts the personalities of mentor and mentee. Kim is an unpredictable, skillful manipulator faithful to his own interests. Hwang, on the other hand, is shown to be one who has made the difficult decision to leave his family in the North in an attempt to bring an end to starvation there and to warn the world about the rise of militarism in the North.

Cha draws on an excerpt from Hwang's memoirs to illuminate Hwang's motivations for defecting: "A family's life is more important than an individual's life; a nation's life is more important than a family's; the human race is more important than a nation." Having thus set readers up in the first chapter to expect to hear more of Hwang's voice in later chapters, the book goes on to focus primarily on a biographical assessment of Kim Jong-Il, written not in Hwang's voice,

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<sup>1</sup> This review employs the book author's choice of transliterations for Korean names.

but in Cha's. Which insights belong to Cha and which originated from Hwang is left unclear.

Subsequent chapters follow Kim Jong-II's development from a little boy who sought his father's attention, to a manipulative, scheming young man, to a dictator who would do anything to eliminate obstructions to his retention of power. In the chapter on Kim's youth, we see a child who lacked patience and struggled with his studies. He didn't have the patience to finish a book or to solve a math problem, according to Hwang.

The young Kim did, however, enjoy looking after his father and "practicing" being a ruler. When Kim was 17 years old, he would gather his father's assistants, doctors, and nurses, ask for a report on the day's events, and give instructions on dealing with his father's health. He sometimes would even give instructions to Central Party politicians on state matters, a role well beyond his purview. What this showed was Kim's ambition and his ability to exercise power.

Kim Jong-II's manipulative nature is illustrated throughout the book—from the manner in which he eliminated his uncle Kim Young-ju from the line of succession to the creation of the young Kim's network of supporters and a vigorous idolization campaign intended to lay the groundwork for succeeding his father. Cha suggests Kim proactively, prematurely, and discreetly paved the way to his own rise to power. Presumably Kim Il-sung had designated Jong-II to be his successor, but the son seized the opportunity to ensure his inheritance on solid, unchallengeable grounds.

The book was published in early 2012, but the author spends little time discussing Kim Jong-II's

death in December 2011 and the subsequent transition to Kim Jong-Un. This is understandable because the book's primary focus is on Kim Jong-II, and so little about Kim Jong-Un is known with certainty. Cha and Sohn do, however, dedicate the last sections of the book to several possible scenarios for the long-term transition to Kim Jong-Un. These range from a more secure and stable dynastic succession to a collective leadership. These same questions on regime stability and Kim Jong-Un's authority are being asked by scholars, journalists, and policymakers alike.<sup>2</sup>

One of this book's strengths lies in its use of primary sources to illuminate Kim's personality and eccentricities in fine detail. It draws on the memoirs of Hwang Jang-yop, Song Hye-rang (she is the elder sister of Song Hye-rim, who was Kim's mistress and mother of Kim's eldest son, Kim Jong-Nam), Kim Jong-II's nephew, and other North Korean insiders and defectors. Hwang can speak with relative authority and authenticity on the subject and the country's political, economic, and humanitarian situations.

Unfortunately, because Hwang's voice appears so rarely, the book does little to distinguish itself from other published literature on North Korea. Furthermore, the book's organization and the author's facts and conclusions are little different from those found in the majority of North Korea-related books. What the authors initially alluded to as the purpose of the book—to tell the story of Kim Jong-II's life and personality through the eyes of his mentor—gets lost for the most part. Although the last chapter and the epilogue are dedicated primarily to Hwang's political convictions and his insights into Kim Jong-II's dictatorship, the material comes too late in the narrative and does little to enhance the book's driving purpose.

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<sup>2</sup> See also in this issue Stephen Mercado's review of *Boei Chuzaikan to iu Ninmu: 38-dosen no Gunji Interijensu* [Duties of a Defense Attaché: Military Intelligence of the 38th Parallel] in which a former Japanese defense attaché offers another perspective on the succession.