Over the past two years, I have been translating and analyzing fiction for the “North Korean Literature in English” project (see it at https://dprklit.blogspot.com/). This is a particularly interesting time to study North Korea’s internal propaganda, as the literary production apparatus managed by the ruling Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) has been tasked with hurriedly building a hagiography for a new leader whose very existence was a closely guarded secret until shortly before he inherited power.

Kim Jong un was officially elevated to successor status at the KWP conference in September 2010, two years after his father Kim Jong Il suffered a debilitating stroke. It was the first time the North Korean media had mentioned him by name. Simultaneously, he was promoted to four-star general and given an important position on the Central Military Commission, despite being only in his late twenties with no significant military experience. Just over a year later, in December 2011, the elder Kim passed away suddenly, and the “Young General” inherited top positions in the party and military hierarchies, making him the de facto head of state and government.

This rapid ascent presented an unprecedented challenge for state propaganda. The first leader, Kim Il sung, was a well-known guerrilla fighter before taking power in 1945 and spent decades constructing his personality cult; Kim Jong Il served for 14 years as his father’s anointed successor prior to inheriting power and his personality cult could draw from his decades of faithful
assistance to his father’s work. Kim Jong Un had no background in government or military service and was doubly handicapped by his youth and prior invisibility.

THE CENTER OF THE STORY
The first works of fiction to depict the new leader appeared in early 2013, and since then the young Kim has become the dominant character on the pages of North Korea’s literary magazines and novels. Several of the country’s most well-known authors have penned stories featuring the new leader. North Korea’s fiction writers are recruited, trained and employed under the auspices of the KWP, which directly commissions and publishes their writing. From these first fictional depictions of the new leader, it is easy to identify several recurrent themes that hint at the KWP’s current areas of emphasis and concern.

Particularly in military affairs, recent fiction has super-imposed Kim Jong Un onto past events that he likely had little to do with. For instance, the story “Sky, Land and Sea” (2015) shows Kim the younger playing a major role in the test launch of the Kwangmyongsöng-2 missile in April 2009, assisting his father by taking charge of planning military counter-strikes in the event that the missile should be intercepted by the US or its allies. He is also shown delivering an analysis of the enemy’s fleet movements before the Party’s Central Military Committee and then recommends that an Air Force squadron be sent to fly maneuvers over US destroyers. Despite the secrecy surrounding the succession and everything related to the leader’s family life, the official state media did not even mention that Kim Jong Il had any sons until Kim Jong Un was announced as successor in 2010. As a result, there is no photographic evidence of Kim Jong Un accompanying his father on official tours or other official events prior to that time. Yet several new stories paint a picture of Kim the Third joining dad on guidance tours, sometimes steering away from the sound of gunfire, a decisive action that the very young leader’s military qualifications, especially after he was granted the highest military rank of wonsa (marshal) in 2012, prior to his 30th birthday. Although he did attend Kim Il Sung Military University, he cannot claim to have fought in or even witnessed any major military conflicts. This makes him the first North Korean leader who has never personally experienced a war. It has fallen upon state fiction to creatively interpret peacetime achievements as signs of military prowess.

For example, the short story “Blossoming Dreams” (Ch’ŏlch’ŏllugbyok) chronicles the reconstruction effort after severe floods hit the north-western region in 2014. In the story, Kim Jong Un talks about “going to war against nature’s tyranny” (ch’ŏlch’ŏllugbyok kwŏnch’ŏl’u chŏnjaeng), refers to Rasŏn as “the front line of disaster relief” (p’ihae pokgu chŏnson) and forms a “Flood Relief Battle Command” (p’ihae pokgu chŏn’u chihubu). In his capacity as supreme commander, he dispatches army units to the stricken area to take charge of the relief effort.

In “Blossoming Dreams” (P’yŏmnin’i Gyum), Kim Jong Un encourages a talented young artist to go to design school rather than enlist in the military, arguing that “The struggle we face today for national construction is a war of creation, lacking the sound of gunfire, a decisive battle against the enemy, and the rich cultural nation of tomorrow will be built by our talented people.” In the same story, two young military cadets bond over their artistic talents and discover how their sense of spacing and proportion helps them to sight their guns more accurately. One of the two friends goes on to become the KWP’s chief architect, while the other becomes a professor of artillery science.

In the absence of an actual war, some recent clashes have been elevated to greater strategic significance. For instance, propaganda has high-
Several stories have served to illustrate Kim’s astute observations during military installation visits and the deferential behavior towards him by senior generals.

In ‘Red Persimmon,’ Kim visits the eponymous female artillery brigade that was beloved by his father and is mobbed by adoring young women in uniform.

Kim Jong Il praises his son’s performance, saying “If the enemy had tried to intercept our satellite, they would surely have been terrified by the merciless counter strike our General [Kim Jong Un] had planned. Truly, he displayed extraordinary military knowledge and tactical brilliance, not to mention guts and courage under fire. Truly a general among generals!”

In both of these stories, Kim Jong Un’s flexibility and his readiness to pivot between beligerence and diplomacy are praised as signs of tactical genius. His ultimate decision to stand down is painted as gutsy and smart, keeping the enemy off guard.

Another way of showcasing Kim Jong Un’s military prowess is through his on-site guidance visits to various military installations. Several stories have served to illustrate Kim’s astute observations during such visits and the deferential behavior towards him by senior generals.

In “Red Persimmon,” Kim visits the eponymous female artillery brigade that was beloved by his father and is mobbed by adoring young women in uniform. In “Land, Sea and Sky,” after a fighter pilot performs some hot-dogging maneuvers and boasts of his squad’s fearlessness, Kim cools him down by preaching that a good flyer must “be aware of everything in the land, sea and sky at once.” Several short stories and poems make reference to the image of Kim riding out in a rickety wooden rowboat to visit a remote island battall-ion, an event that was promoted in North Korean media reports in March of 2013.

Another recurrent theme is civilian-military relations. In “Blessings in Disguise,” Kim Jong Un is informed that the local citizens have been bringing gifts to the troops deployed to the area for flood relief, and are distressed that they will not accept them. The same story also describes a scene in which a woman waits all day outside a naval base to thank a young sailor who had donated blood to save her injured daughter. Later in the story, Kim Jong Un asks his advisor how the local residents of the flood zone are getting along with the military units he dispatched for the relief effort. He is informed that the soldiers are having difficulty turning away local residents who are excessively eager to offer their hospitality. In another story, “Gratitude” (Kumis) by Yun Kyong-chan, a military officer is scolded for taking food and medicine from the locals. It turns out that the food was actually given freely by the local residents out of concern for a soldier’s health and in gratitude for the platoon’s efforts to renovate their factory. These hyperbolic depictions of amiable civilian-military relations suggest that this has been a continuing point of concern for the Party.

**MAKING A VIRTUE OF RESPECTFUL YOUTH**

Kim Sŏng-su, a South Korean researcher specializing in North Korean literature, has written that the biggest challenge of Kim Jong Un’s succession was not the primogeniture issue (he being the third son) but the fact of his extreme youth, only 27 or 28 at the time of his formal designation as successor in 2010. This was problematic from the point of view of North Korea’s many extremely elderly officials, some veterans of the Korean War, who might reasonably have resisted the succession on the grounds that the young leader would disrespect them and eject them from positions of power in favor of younger cadres.

To combat this fear, many recent works of fiction have depicted Kim Jong Un as showing extreme deference to elderly veterans and flying into a rage when they suffer the slightest hint of an insult. This new fiction toes a fine line between depictions of older officials as ossified, inflexible and incapable of absorbing new ideas on the one hand, but still worthy of respect and gratitude on the other.

This is precisely the conflict seen in “Sky, Land, and Sea,” which depicts Kim Jong Un’s days as a student at Kim Il Sung Military University. In the story, one of Kim’s classmates is overheard complaining that the lectures are repeating things they’ve already learned in history class. Kim flies into a rage and delivers an impassioned speech: “The tactics developed by our Great Leader [Kim Il Sung] through long years on the battlefield are complete, exhaustive, independently developed tactics. Then the General [Kim Jong Il] further developed the Juche Tactics created by the Great Leader. We must follow these Juche Tactics to fight and defeat our enemies. And then this novice who’s just entered school acts like he already knows all the profound tactics of the Great Leader and the General?” Chastened, the young hothead apologizes to the future leader.

Similarly, in the short story “Our Succession” (Woori Kyesu?ng), a top military tactician is compiling a book of modern military strategy while completely ignoring the advice and experiences of his elderly father who fought in the Korean War. The son argues, “How can conventional warfare using tanks and cannons possibly relate to modern warfare, dealing in missiles and nuclear warheads?” Kim Jong Un hears of this and quickly rebukes the son with a stern speech: “Our present reality may have changed substantially from the days of the Liberation War and the Pueblo Inci-
ent, but the essential spirit by which the Great Leader [Kim Il Sung] and the Great General [Kim Jong II] triumphed remains the same. The new ‘military-first’ generation must have the tactical ability for modern warfare, but our ability must be rooted in that essential spirit or it will collapse like a house of cards.”

KEEPING UP WITH OUR HERO
Several stories depict older cadres struggling to keep up with the fresh new ideas that the young leader keeps serving up. In “Blossoming Dreams,” Kim’s chief architect is floored by his idea to have young art students decorate a new children’s hospital and help design an amusement park. In “Teacher,” two senior education officials—one in his 70s and one in his 80s—are inspired to pursue education reforms after attending a rock concert:

The Moranbong Concert had made quite a stir. You could say that their main purpose was to sound a warning bell against habitual, rigid, backward ways of doing business. Their fresh, strong and dynamic performance is what makes them so distinctive… It stirred everyone in attendance to wake from their stupor and look around at the world.

From a linguistic perspective, North Korean writers faced a unique challenge in composing the young leader’s dialogue, particularly in interactions with older characters. Korean is a hierarchical language, which means that one uses different forms when addressing one’s elders or superiors than when speaking with equals. In North Korean fiction, the supreme leaders have always been depicted using plain speech, while other characters always address them in turn using the most extremely deferential speech possible.

This was never very problematic for stories about Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, but it is truly disconcerting to the Korean reader to see senior university professors addressing a college-aged Kim Jong Un using speech forms that one would ordinarily reserve for one’s revered grandfather. Kim Jong Un always responds in casual speech, even when addressing senior military officials and Party elders. There is a cognitive dissonance in hearing a young man speak this way, particularly when the same passage may describe the young leader’s ruddy smile and youthful energy.

FICTION PUSHED TO THE LIMIT
The last five years of North Korean fiction have provided a fascinating window into totalitarian myth-building under the challenging conditions of a hasty leadership transition. The regime has deployed its top literary talent for the task of creating Kim Jong Un’s legend and patching over his main vulnerabilities—his youth and lack of military experience. In reading these stories and observing the same themes repeated by different authors, one can almost reverse-engineer the list of core themes that the party assigned to be given emphasis.

How these stories and their political messages are being absorbed by North Korean readers is impossible to know at the present time, given the slow trickle of defectors and the opacity of North Korean society to external researchers. Nevertheless, a thematic analysis of recent North Korean fiction can provide important clues into the Party’s evolving concerns and priorities. Only time will tell how effectively it can continue to control the story line.

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