

Fifield, Anna. *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un.*

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John Cussen
Edinboro University

Great Successor or *Great Succeeder*? One has cause to ask this question after reading *Washington Post* bureau chief Anna Fifield's engaging, informed, and honest-to-a-fault biography of Kim Jong Un, the now thirty-six-year-old, once stripling of a god/man/despot who is currently (and for the foreseeable future) calling the shots in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea. For if *The Great Successor* is a striking title as well as an appropriate one in its intimations of the ceiling placed on the current Supreme Leader's status and stature by the *juche* necessity of his never surpassing in merit, power or distinction his grandfather's, Eternal Leader Kim Il Sung's, pre-eminence in those regards, and, if, too, the title *Great Successor* reminds us of the *world's-first-Communist-dynasty* trick that the North Koreans have been successfully pulling off by hook and by sophisticated rhetorical crook for the past quarter century—indeed, longer if, as various experts have recommended, one includes in the count the near two decades of heir-in-training politics that preceded Kim Jong Il's official replacement of his Eternal Leader father in 1994 (Worden 2008, xxxi)—the title *Great Succeeder* seems equally appropriate, given the come-out-of-nowhere Kim Jong Un's (KJU's) several extraordinary successes since his inauspicious ascension into office in late 2011 and since, too, the three demonstrably insecure purge years that followed (Chang 2005, 100–102). And what have been those successes? At the very least these: his steering clear from oblivion and dissolution the wrecked state bequeathed to him by his begetter/father Kim Jong Il, his winking liberalization of his country's economy, his getting away with murder in a foreign capital's primary airport, and his triumphal summits with Presidents Moon, Trump and Xi in 2018 and 2019. Lastly, a scarier thought for you and for me than it apparently is for Fifield, another reason to think of KJU as the *Great Succeeder* as opposed to *Great Successor* is the impression her book's last, summit chapters give of him as of a guy sufficiently cagey to outwit future problems, and, thus, to be around for quite some time.

Second question: Just how challenging was the project that Fifield imposed upon herself when, late in 2014, roughly three years into KJU's unfolding, fledgling *regency*

¹ Regency, meaning stand-in for the absent head of state—I employ it here for this reason: because such is the de facto case in the DPRK, where since 1994 Kim Il Sung has been the Eternal Leader and his successors his fill-ins. See in References, Central Intelligence Agency, Chiefs of State and Cabinet Members of Foreign Governments—Korea, North – NDE.

[italics deliberate¹], she decided she would write a book about this as of yet lightly-regarded, new figure on the international stage? I ask it because to answer it is, yes, to get some sense of her journalistic achievement here, but also to remind us of both the limits of her vision and of the North Korean executive branch's oft-demonstrated propensity, not yet entirely jettisoned, for keep-them-guessing behaviors (Herskovitz 2020). In any event, to answer the question, I point to fellow journalist Mark Bowden's 2015 *Vanity Fair* profile of KJU, for in it he takes as his theme the several impediments destined to be met by anyone setting out to write a biographical sketch of the maximally protected, maximally staged man who was/is the ever-propagandistic DPRK's god-like autocrat-in-chief, as well as too, paradoxically, its most observed face. First, Bowden said, the Supreme Leader profiler would have to contend with the profusion of cartoonish characterizations that had already, four years into the KJU era, so quickly affixed themselves to the coiffed-as-if-for-branding thirty year old: "He's Fatboy Kim the Third, the North Korean tyrant with a Fred Flintstone haircut—the grinning, chain-smoking owner of his own small nuclear arsenal, brutal warden to about 120,000 political prisoners....a bloodthirsty madman and buffoon." Then too, said Bowden, there was the problem of the interference put in the profiler's head by the state's official menu of its Supreme Leader's virtues and capacities. Had Kim as an undergraduate so outshone his military professors in matters strategic and battle-related that they took notes while he lectured rather than he penciling while they professed? Had he at age three begun already to exhibit his alleged cowboy-like marksmanship with a rifle? Indeed, for that matter, when was the guy born? Dennis Rodman, Kim's basketball-celebrity pal in the first years of his administration, got it straight from the Supreme Leader himself that he had been born in 1983. However, the year offered by his state's historians was the prior one, 1982, in other words, the seventieth anniversary year of his grandfather's millennial birth in 1912. (As for Fifield, she reports for her own strong reasons 1984 [see below]). And there were too, said Bowden, other problems that the profiler of KJU would have to navigate, largest among them, the out-of-sight handling of the

future autocrat's rearing and education, the media's frequent slips into misinformation in his regard, and the treacherous problematic of the limited reliability of the testimonies of North Korean defectors, as well as too of the country's resident citizens.

So, yes, no doubt about it, Fifield had undertaken a daunting task when she in late 2014, as she explains in her prologue, chose to write a book about North Korea's latest autocrat and chief. However, as she also explains, she did so with a four-year Korea hand's awareness of the DPRK's Orwellian procedurals, and she did so, too, with a plan. She would "talk to everyone who'd ever met him" (6), going wherever she needed to go to find that select group of people: to the Japanese Alps where she would speak with the sushi chef that a quarter-century before had prepared meals for KJU while entertaining the imperious and largely friendless princeling as a sort of factotum/playmate; to a "Middle America" dry cleaners, where she would interview the maternal aunt-and-husband pair who had been his guardians while at school in Bern, Switzerland; to Switzerland itself, where she would chat with one of his high school classmates; to Brooklyn, NY, where she would speak to the Vice producer who had orchestrated the first of the Rodman trips to Pyongyang; and to North Korea (ten times), where she would witness herself at fairly close range the Supreme Leader's evolving public persona. Then, too, though she does not say so in her prologue, her plan also clearly had other components. Among other things, she would interview the considerable number of former North Korean business people who, having tired of the bribery culture that prevails in the DPRK, left behind all that they could not carry, absconded with whatever they could and now live in China and South Korea. She would, too, visit and surveil the physical locations that might have either shaped KJU's character (Wonsan, the beach town where he summered as a child, for example) or might provide insights into the guarded secret that is his international game plan (the China-DPRK border area and the DMZ, for example). On campuses in Seoul she would talk to authorities in the expert-rich field of DPRK analysis. On campuses in the US, she would consult with academics whose expertise was tyrants.

She would read broadly in the North Korean sphere, getting, too, to books like Imogen O'Neill's *The Golden Cage: Life with Kim Jong Il*, in other words, to manuscripts withheld from publication both in the DPRK and outside for fear of Kim regime reprisals. And, lastly, she would draw from the archive of her own relatively veteran foreign-journalist's experiences of the Korean peninsula. In short, she planned to leave no stone unturned.

And what is the KJU profile that Fifield delivers? To its credit, it is the by now standard one that observers of his regime have come more or less to agree upon—that, first, of an ill-disciplined, spoiled-brat princeling who became, next, for a brief period anyway, a *capo dei capi* in training until, thirdly, after his father's death, he became the main man himself and, as such, distinguished himself in the categories of ruthlessness and greed, until, lastly, the winds of international power relations having shifted his way, he proved himself a surprisingly polished head-of-state-summiteer. Also to her credit, Fifield's KJU file is brought to life by her freshening journalistic observations. Had anyone before her, for example, noticed the bizarre irony of the beach-town Wonsan's having been, long before it came to serve as the summer playground for Kim Jong Il's several fantastically indulged children, the port of entry for “the young anti-imperialist fighter with the nom de guerre of Kim Il Sung...when he returned home to Korea in 1945” (11), a man legendarily toughened by his Mongolian war experiences and, to boot, one allegedly committed to Marxism by way of his cahoots with the Russians (Myers 2006, 89–90)? If so, I'm not aware of it, and yet that is what Fifield in vivid, passing prose does as she opens her book's first part—aptly subtitled, I should add, “The Apprenticeship.” For that ironically is what the knickered Jong Un's era of limitless childhood indulgence in many ways was—the ideal preparation for his adult calling (Pak Jung H 2018). Similarly, on the subjects of his rearing and of his father's settling after years of reflection on his youngest son as his successor, Fifield is likely right in pushing harder than have other observers of the DPRK the agency in both these matters of the Dear Leader's third wife, KJU's Japan-born, ethnically-Korean mother, Ko Yong Hui. Next,

as for the basket of contradictions that has been the tyrant/modernizer's governance record since taking office, Fifield shrewdly chooses to focus on neither one nor the other but, instead, to get in, in roughly equal measures, both sides of the Supreme Leader's Janus-like, Taeguk-like, and arguably bi-polar administrative model. Thus, she describes in vivid fullness in chapters called "No More Belt Tightening" and "The Elites of Pyonghattan," the liberal Kim's encouragement of his country's 장마당 (*jangmadang*—community markets) economy, the mixed blessing of his generous issuance of visas to the one hundred thousand or so North Korean workers who now annually submit from abroad roughly \$500 million dollars to his coffers, and, too, his coddling of his contemporaries in the millennial generation's elite class. Meanwhile in a pair of other chapters whose themes are plainly articulated in the first's title, "Better to Be Feared than Loved," she describes the ruthless reign of terror and surveillance that basically has been Kim's first nine years in office. Among his first official acts as newly installed boss of bosses were the tightening of borders and the steady execution of perceived malcontents (some 340 people in just the first five years of his regime, says one reliable report [Petras 2017]). Again, save to say that both the good and the bad that one sees in KJU are true, Fifield's last chapters, descriptive of his behaviors since 2014, make no effort to reconcile the Supreme Leader's contradictory features in the contemporary moment—his, for example, launching of rockets with nuclear capabilities on one day and his shaking hands on another with the leaders of arch-enemy states.

Fifield's narration is swift but never breezy. No, how could it be breezy when so many of its contents are horrific? I'm thinking as I write this sentence of Kim's employment of antiaircraft guns in the execution of one of his inherited court's principal figures, his humiliation and execution of an uncle/advisor two years after his arrival in office, and the spy-novel plotting of his elder brother's murder in a Malaysian airport in 2017. I'm thinking too of his father's distinguishing himself as the world's largest buyer of Hennessy Paradis cognac in the height of his country's famine years. I'm thinking, again, of the North Koreans' handing a \$2 million

hospital bill to the US State Department representative who was at that moment trying to retrieve for the Wambrier family the comatose remains of their dying son Otto. And I'm thinking, lastly, it goes without saying, of the long list of hellish governmental practices that have been—since, it seems, forever—the too long oppressed North Korean people's birth-to-death affliction.

Another of her text's virtues is the visual and vocal fullness of its peeks into North Korean life today. Interviewing a one-time trucker now defected to Seoul, she learns from the man that "it's the women who really make money" in North Korea (105). That's the moral of his story about the aunt for whom he worked. Though she was married to a military officer, she, as the procurer and vendor of market goods, "was the main earner in the house," said the former trucker (104). Meanwhile, from another of her Seoul interviewees, a one-time drug dealer in North Korea's northernmost North Hamgyŏng Province, she gets this thought: That there is no such thing as law enforcement in North Korea. "You can always bribe your way out" (110). On the other hand, she gets too from several of her defector interviewees testimonies in the opposite direction, that is, stories of their having learned from an early age to keep their mouths shut, lest doing otherwise they found themselves summarily impounded in one of the Kim regime's ever-full, nightmarish detention centers. For them, people of lesser resources, the notion of impunity in North Korea was a dangerous fantasy. Lastly, visiting, because she is allowed to, the restaurants and shops of the capital city's Pyonghattan district, Fifield sees evidences of the KJU-sponsored coddling of the DPRK's junior, millennial elite: "a fancy supermarket stocked with outrageously expensive imported products like Norwegian salmon, French cheese, and Swiss muesli" (167–168), "huge flat-screen televisions and top-of-the-line European vacuum cleaners...if you have a few thousand dollars to drop on such things" (168), and, in an appropriately accoutered Italian pizzeria, this odd oral response from one of Fifield's tablemates to her remark that the Supreme Leader's appreciation of pizza must have been developed while he was a high schooler in Switzerland, "How can you know more about our leader than we do?" (166).

As for features of the *Great Successor* with which one might quarrel, yes, there are a few. Howsoever valuable the testimonies Fifield gets from most of the people she interviews, she swallows with too much faith the stories she receives from the now defected guardian aunt who tells her of the Dear Leader's having spent as a child many hours "playing with planes and ships in his bedroom" (47). Was that actually the case? Or might such stories be, instead, a component of the state sponsored myth of the Supreme Leader's technological giftedness? Again, readers like Ra Jong-yil, author of *Inside North Korea's Theocracy: The Rise and Sudden Fall of Jang Song-Thaek*, will no doubt argue that the Fifield report comes up short in its estimate of the *songbun* (race, caste and bloodline) problems bequeathed to KJU by his mother's *Zainichi* origins. Once apprised of such problems, and once (if ever) empowered to think rebelliously, the North Korean people will have yet another warrant to put an end to the Japan-tainted Kim III's reign of terror, say Jang and various of his book's readers (Choe Sang hun 2018). Next, what of North Korea's relations with Japan? Even in a text whose climax is reached with accounts of Kim 3.0's summit triumphs in his dealings with Presidents Trump, Moon and Xi (and too with an account of his sister's Kim Yo Jong's winning handling of the Korean Winter Olympics scene in the early spring of the year before), that only two pages of Fifield's book, says its index, concern Japan seems impossible. And, lastly, many are the North Korean observers who would be less sure about KJU's staying power than is Fifield in her book's despot-stunned closing, summit chapters (Tara O 2016; Kaplan 2018).

Yes, reading those last Fifield chapters, I myself, a literature professor for the most part, am reminded of nothing so much as that most startling of dictator scenes in Gabriel García Márquez's Cold War travel classic *De Viaje por los países socialistas: 90 días en la cortina de hierro* [*A Journey Through the Socialist Countries: 90 Days Behind the Iron Curtain*]*—*the one in which the future *One Hundred Years of Solitude* author, stands for a long moment in front of the enshrined cadaver of the then three-year-deceased Joseph Stalin and, almost impossible to imagine, admires the

man! Yes, believe it or not, that's what the future Nobel Prize winner did! And he, to recall, was a South American who as a newspaperman had often written as if the despot's sniper was at his window, as well as, too, an expat-traveler who had just in the last several weeks seen all that was second-rate and despairing in mid-century Eastern Europe, as well as, lastly, a pilgrim of sorts who had just been told by a Muscovite woman whose judgment he trusted that the not-long-deceased Stalin had been "the most bloodthirsty, sinister, and ambitious figure in the entire history of Russia!" (50) When he finally got to Moscow himself and stood in front of the enshrined corpse of one of the most ruinous dictators who had ever lived, he *waxed nostalgic*, so to speak in García Márquez fashion, thinking less about the tyrant's crimes against humanity than he did about the feminine cut of the dead man's hands and fingers (52). Why did the widely regarded *world's best writer* do so strange a thing? And why at the end of her engaging and knowing profile of Kim Jong Un does Fifield do, or at least write, similarly? Those are good questions. I will let others answer them.

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