History Flows: déjà vu of Koguryo’s downfall in North Korea?
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Since 1948, North Korea has been run by the de-facto ‘Kim dynasty,’ from the founder Kim Il-sung to his son Kim Jong-il and finally to his grandson Kim Jong-un. The recent purge of Kim Jong-un’s uncle, Jang Song-thaek by shocking capital punishment proves again that the North is a dynasty, not a modern socialist state. This drama also indicates that Pyongyang has engaged in a power struggle within the Kim regime. Kim may have consolidated his grip of power in the short term by executing his regent and a potential rival who had close ties to China, but in the long term he has erred in destabilizing his power base by antagonizing China.

Although Pyongyang is closer to Beijing than any capitals in the world, the bloody removal of political enemies through Stalinist-style purging reminds us that North Korea’s one-man dictatorship is unlike China’s collective leadership of the Communist Party, which has abstained from killing political opponents since the Cultural Revolution. Current Chinese president Xi Jinping had a summit with South Korea’s new President Park Geun-hye in June 2013, but he has yet to meet with his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong-un. The brutal execution of Jang, who actually presided over trade with China as a ‘reformer,’ notably through his handling of special economic zones between the two traditional allies, will resonate negatively between Pyongyang and Beijing.

Among the many charges that drove Jang Song-thaek to his dramatic downfall, the most decisive would be one that Jang allegedly tried to hinder the succession of power from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un. North Korea’s top priority is its Suryong (supreme leader) system of unitary leadership, therefore any challenge to the rule of Jong-un is a challenge to the very foundation of the regime. Jang had favored and secretly sponsored Jong-un’s older half-brother Kim Jong-
nam, who is known to have been staying in Macau, China. Jong-nam reportedly criticized the third generational succession of power to his ‘inexperienced’ younger brother, citing Jong-un’s short two-year preparation as a designated successor. After Jang’s execution, Jong-nam’s whereabouts remain unknown, but China is believed to be protecting him.

Another fatal charge levied by the special military tribunal alleged that Jang Song-thaek had tried to carry out a coup by mobilizing his own faction within the military. It is noteworthy therefore that Jang had admitted during the short investigation he had made some acquaintances with those who were appointed in the past within the military. Such a revelation indicates that the current regime is trying to speed up the transfer of power from the old guard of Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un’s younger group. Earlier in July 2012, Kim Jong-un fired General Ri Yong-ho, a powerful military stalwart of his father’s old guard from the post of army chief. Furthermore, reports from the South Korean Ministry of Unification show that Kim Jong-un has changed nearly half of the top officers both within the party and the military in the two years since his father’s death.

The current situation of the North has some striking parallels to the period of the historical destruction of Koguryo, an ancient kingdom (BC 37-AD 668) straddling northeastern China and the northern Korean Peninsula. North Korea has boasted that it is a modern Koguryo warring against ‘the US imperialism.’ Koguryo is a model of Korean nationalism and irredentism in that it was the largest territory occupied by the Korean people. North Korea takes special pride in Koguryo, for the kingdom won wars against invading Chinese dynasties such as the Sui and Tang dynasties numerous times.

**Comparisons of Koguryo (Goguryeo) and North Korea**

![Figure 1: Photos from the Wikimedia public domain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:History_of_Korea-645.png) and under creative commons licenses from Wikimedia Commons [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_korea_english_labels.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_korea_english_labels.png).
However, Koguryo collapsed after being jointly attacked by the Chinese Tang and the Korean Silla dynasties, another kingdom located south of Koguryo. Before that, Tang could not strike down Koguryo on its own. Therefore Tang and Silla had to work together and they invaded Koguryo from the north and the south. At that time Koguryo was run by a de-facto military regime led by Yon Gaesomoon, a powerful general who killed even his own king and more than 100 political opponents in a coup. After Yon died in 665, infighting among his three sons facilitated the drastic downfall of Koguryo. The eldest son, Namsaeng, joined Tang forces as a guide for the successful invasion after he lost military leadership to his two younger brothers. In sum, Koguryo was destroyed amid internal divisions over power succession and the loosening of social cohesion as witnessed by an exodus of its people to neighboring kingdoms. This scenario bears remarkable resemblance to North Korea today. Although China will not invade North Korea as it did to Koguryo, it still holds a ‘divisive’ card in Kim Jong-nam, just like Tang dynasty had in Namsaeng during the final years of Koguryo.

Before the news of Jang’s alleged betrayal broke out, it has been a strict taboo for North Koreans to even allude to a coup within the military. But that perception changed when news of Jang’s purported coup were widely published and broadcasted through North Korean mouthpieces such as the Rodong Sinmun and the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). The North has boasted that it has spotlessly kept the unity of its people and military around the young Suryong, Kim Jong-un. But Jang’s purge has exposed North Korea as a vulnerable country, much like any other military regimes in the third world. Although people will continue to be mesmerized by the dreadful terror politics of Kim Jong-un regime for the time being, they will realize implicitly that the Kim dynasty is not invincible. The fact that the North Korean army held a meeting on Dec. 16, 2013 to pledge their fealty to “hold Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un in high esteem as the unitary center of unity” is counter-evidence that the military was indeed destabilized after the execution of Jang.

Abraham Lincoln once said: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” As of May of last year, subscribers using mobile phones in North Korea numbered more than two million people. These days the spread of information within the closed society has become quicker and broader. Reports of Jang’s disgraceful ruin and execution was unusual because of its speed. Furthermore, there are now more than 25,000 North Korean defectors living in South Korea, some of whom maintain regular contact with their families and relatives in the North through mobile phones and even remit money back home via China. These developments are positive for increasing the flow of information. The inter-Korean project, the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which has survived the North’s nuclear tests and a five-month shut-down last year, is hiring more than 53,000 North Korean workers after it reopened. Developing the Kaesong industrial complex could play the role of a Trojan Horse to become a foothold of market economy within the command economy.

Nobody knows when the rule of Kim dynasty will end. However, one thing is for certain: as time goes by, the seemingly absolute power of the Kim dynasty will crumble in the end. This is the
lesson of modern history. No dictatorship has lasted for over the three generations, and the Kim dynasty is unlikely to buck that trend. Most recently the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya can attest to that lesson. While Kim Jong-un can build a ski resort quickly using military laborers, as he did recently in Masikryong, his basis for ruling the poverty-stricken people is being seriously undermined. Unless the North lives up to its nominal socialist ideal of equality and justice, regardless of its emulation for ancient Koguryo, the days of the Kim regime could be numbered.

Table 1: Comparison between last period of Koguryo and North Korea

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*Death of Kim Il-sung
**final leader / ***current leader
****Koguryo faced security threats together from the north and the south, while North Korea faces them mostly from the south. Therefore, China still holds a decisive key for the North’s survival.

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