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Characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s leadership: analyzing the tone of official North Korean media

Atsuhito Isozaki
Faculty of Law, Keio University, Yokohama, Japan

ABSTRACT
This paper describes the characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s leadership primarily through the analysis of the tone observed in Rodong Sinmun, the official organ of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK). It has described five characteristics of the Kim Jong-un administration.

The first characteristic is preference for fast-paced action. While there are considerable overlaps with previous studies, it is possible to clearly identify aspects that are different from the Kim Jong-il administration.

The second characteristic is Kim Jong-un’s tendency toward pragmatism. He has repeatedly criticized “formalism” during his field inspections.

Third, a new tendency to place greater importance on the policy-making process has become apparent. In addition to the plenary sessions of the Central Committee, meetings of the WPK Politburo Presidium, and Central Military Commission of the WPK are now convened, albeit irregularly.

Fourth, obsession with certain specific issues is also characteristic of Kim Jong-un. His areas of concern are apparent from his works and from reports on his activities. These include science and technology, education, children, households, and families, the ilkun [executive staffs], buildings, vehicles, the air force, physical education, the Internet, and diversification of foreign trade.

Lastly, the shift away from Songun is evident. The Kim Jong-un has increasingly distanced itself from the army-first Songun politics that symbolized the Kim Jong-il period. Kim Jong-un no longer mentions Songun. The National Defence Commission, which was the command center for the Songun system, was disbanded by an amendment to the Constitution.

KEYWORDS
North Korea; DPRK; Kim Jong-un

1 Introduction
Kim Jong-un’s leadership is even more difficult to analyze than that of Kim Jong-il. One reason for this is that although eight years have passed since the administration came into office, the available data is too limited to allow for a pattern-based analysis of its policies. In June 2018, the first ever North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea)–US summit was held; it was in that same year that Kim Jong-un himself, as Chairman of the...
State Affairs Commission, had begun to meet with other heads of government. This situation makes it difficult to predict what might happen in the future. Furthermore, with regard to foreign policy, other countries’ responses to North Korea must also be considered.

Even more problematic is the decided lack of testimonies concerning Kim Jong-un. More than 1,000 North Korean defectors cross over to South Korea each year, yet the majority of them come from poverty-stricken backgrounds and have never even visited the capital Pyongyang. There are very few defectors from the political elite who may be directly acquainted with Kim Jong-un. Former Deputy Ambassador to the United Kingdom Thae Yong-ho, who came to the spotlight after giving various testimonies in different countries, had never met Kim Jong-un. In retrospect, testimonies concerning the previous chairman of the National Defence Commission, Kim Jong-il, were left by his sister-in-law, Song Hye-rang; nephew, Lee Han-young; and eldest son, Kim Jong-nam, who was assassinated in Kuala Lumpur – essentially, these were multiple testimonies from members of the North Korean “royal family.” Testimonies were also obtained from closely allied officials including Hwang Jang-yeop and Shin Kyung-wan; South Korean cinema couple Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee, who are said to have been abducted at the direction of Kim Jong-il; and Kim Jong-il’s “personal chef” Fujimoto Kenji, who prepared sushi at the nerve center of Pyongyang for 13 years. Thus, it was possible, to a certain degree, to infer the characteristics of Kim Jong-il’s leadership by cross-checking these sources.

However, it has not been possible to obtain precise testimonies regarding Kim Jong-un. Information in publicly available sources relates only to his early years, including his

| Table 1. Incidence of keywords in Kim Jong-un’s New Year’s day addresses (2013–2019). |
|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                               | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il    | 33   | 17   | 15   | 11   | 10   | 7    | 0    |
| Last Instructions [Yuhun]     | 4    | 1    | 0    | 2    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| Socialism                     | 18   | 12   | 11   | 16   | 12   | 22   | 32   |
| Juche                         | 13   | 3    | 7    | 15   | 12   | 14   | 9    |
| Songun                        | 6    | 3    | 3    | 2    | 1    | 0    | 0    |
| Byeongjin                     | 0    | 1    | 2    | 0    | 0    | 3    | 1    |
| People’s Army                 | 12   | 11   | 14   | 10   | 6    | 4    | 4    |
| Nuclear                       | 0    | 6    | 4    | 3    | 5    | 22   | 2    |
| Rocket                        | 0    | 0    | 0    | 2    | 3    | 0    | 0    |
| Satellite                     | 4    | 0    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 0    | 0    |
| Imperialist                   | 1    | 2    | 1    | 0    | 2    | 0    | 0    |
| Peace                         | 7    | 9    | 6    | 9    | 6    | 10   | 25   |
| Unification                   | 22   | 14   | 18   | 27   | 17   | 12   | 7    |
| Economy                       | 24   | 15   | 16   | 17   | 18   | 21   | 38   |
| Technology                    | 8    | 12   | 8    | 10   | 6    | 8    | 5    |
| Strong and Prosperous Nation  | 12   | 9    | 4    | 8    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| [Kangseongkukka]              |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Sanctions                     | 0    | 0    | 1    | 0    | 2    | 3    | 3    |
| Self-Rehabilitation           | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 2    | 2    | 3    |
| [Jaryeokkaengsaeng]           |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Life of the People            | 6    | 7    | 5    | 5    | 4    | 3    | 3    |
| Electricity                   | 1    | 5    | 3    | 4    | 7    | 10   | 9    |
| Family                        | 1    | 1    | 2    | 1    | 0    | 1    | 2    |
| Sports                        | 3    | 10   | 4    | 5    | 2    | 3    | 3    |

Prepared by the author based on Rodong Sinmun. Instances of “Kim Il-sung” and “Kim Jong-il” include words such as “Great Leader” and “Great General.” “Nuclear” is included only in the context of nuclear weapons, and “unification” only in the context of reunification with the South.

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1This paper is an extensively revised and expanded version of “Kimujon’un lincho no Leadership,” Kironi Tatsu Kitachosen [“Chairman Kim Jong-un’s Leadership,” The Korean Peninsula at a Crossroads], Tokyo: Japan Center for Economic Research FY2018 “Asia Research” Report which is a paper written in Japanese without footnotes.
schooling in Switzerland. Therefore, “Pyongyangology,” a traditional method of interpreting primary sources to study and understand North Korea, is playing a relatively more important role.

Accordingly, this paper describes the characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s leadership primarily through the analysis of the tone observed in Rodong Sinmun, the official organ of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK). The author has previously analyzed remarks made by Kim Jong-un in a number of discussions and identified several points of interest².

Various previous studies have been conducted in this field, particularly in South Korea (the Republic of Korea). One notable example is a 2015 study by South Korean scholar Lee Gwan-se, laying out four characteristics of the Kim Jong-un regime: (1) national administration centered on the WPK, (2) establishment of governance rules, (3) change in the status of the military, and (4) emphasis on economic accomplishments and people’s lives³.

In addition, Lee Dong-chan identified the following four characteristics of the directionality of Kim Jong-un’s policy decisions: (1) emphasis on nuclear missile development, along with guaranteeing the hereditary regime as the highest priority; (2) emphasis on economic development to ensure the stability of the regime and increase the loyalty of the people; (3) emphasis on becoming a “normal nation” to guarantee the system and conduct normal national activities; and (4) emphasis on mobilizing young people and science/technology to revitalize the depressed social climate and backward industries⁴.

Among other works from South Korea, there is a discussion by Hong Song-hoo who compared the leadership style of Kim Jong-un with that of Kim Jong-il. All these previous studies are convincing and provide valuable insights into the Kim Jong-un regime. However, since they attempt to gather information emanating from each country and organize this inductively, the possibility that they may contain inaccurate information resulting from this cannot be ruled out. In fact, one can also find a large amount of misinformation in the South Korean media⁵.

On the other hand, Japanese researchers such as Izumi Hajime, Sakai Takashi, Hiraïwa Shunji, and Hirai Hisashi have conducted individual studies of the Kim Jong-un regime through careful investigation of North Korean sources; however, these studies do not identify the characteristics of the Supreme Leader’s leadership.

Meanwhile, there are some ongoing problems, and the analysis of Kim Jong-un by the media is making progress. In a special program titled “Kim Jong-un’s Ambition,” aired in April 2018, Japan’s national broadcaster NHK investigated remarks made by Kim Jong-un using artificial intelligence, identifying 10 keywords that he appears to consider important, including “ilkun [executive staffs],” “congresses,” “Kimilsungism–Kimjongilism” and “Youth League.”⁶ South Korea’s public broadcaster KBS pointed out that Kim Jong-un’s remarks during the early years of his administration point to a certain yearning for the days

²For example, Izozaki, “2013nen-no Kim Jong-un Rosaku Kensho”; Izsozaki, “2012nen-no Kik Jong-un Rosaku Kensho.”.
³Lee Gwan-se, “Kim Jong’un-nyu no tochi style to naisei risk.”.
⁴Lee Dong-chan, “Kim Jung Un’s Personality and Policy Decision Directionality.”.
⁵For example, the Chosun Ilbo, the newspaper with the largest circulation in South Korea, reported that Kim Jong-un’s aunt Kim Kyong-hui had “committed suicide,” only for her to appear in the North Korean media in January 2020, confirming that she was alive and well.
⁶North Korea reacted sharply to this program in the form of individual statements. Heo Yeong-min, “Hideous Abomination of an Intolerable Government-Controlled Media,” Rodong Sinmun, May 1 2018.
of Kim Il-sung, including in his use of words such as “golden age,” “restoration of might,” and “great teachings.”

Therefore, the present study describes five characteristics in an attempt to find a general directionality through the use of a more versatile concept. Rather than relying on the information including hearsay, the study focuses only on characteristics that can be ascertained through the analysis of official North Korean media. It is not possible to elucidate the trends of the country merely by analyzing the tone of the North Korean media. However, “Uidaeoseong SeonJeon” [greatness propaganda] extolling the Supreme Leader, which is emphasized within North Korea, is a product of the North Korean media itself, and one can understand how Kim Jong-un’s leadership is portrayed through careful examination of the content disseminated therein. Although it is difficult to specify clear standards to identify characteristics, the paper presents specific examples in which conspicuous differences between the Kim Jong-un and Kim Jong-il administrations can be observed.

2 Characteristic I: Preference for fast-paced action as symbolized by “Dansum-e”

In his 2019 New Year’s Day address, Kim Jong-un stated, “If the US responds to our proactive, preemptive efforts with trustworthy measures and corresponding practical actions, bilateral relations will develop wonderfully at a fast pace through the process of more definite and epochal measures.” The “fast pace” alluded to here is one of the characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s leadership.

The Kim Jong-un regime was established at a lightning pace. The news of Kim Jong-il’s illness emerged in August 2008; by the end of the year, Kim Jong-un had already been appointed unofficially as his successor, and his official appointment was at the 3rd Conference of the WPK in September 2010. Shortly after Kim Jong-il’s death in December 2011, Kim Jong-un began to be referred to as the “Supreme Leader” and was nominated as Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army (KPA). In April 2012, he was appointed the First Secretary of the WPK and the “First Chairman” of the National Defence Commission. Kim Jong-un assumed top positions in the party, government, and army at the tender ages of 27 and 28. These changes occurred in the space of just four months following his father’s death, at a much faster pace than the rise to power of Kim Jong-il, who was declared General Secretary of the WPK after a three-year period of mourning.

Although it appears that the successor regime was established quickly out of necessity, even after Kim Jong-un took office, his administration continued to be characterized by a fast-paced approach and bold policy changes, symbolized by “dansum-e” [in one breath], a slogan employed by the Supreme Leader himself. According to the KWP’s official organ Kulloja, before his death, Kim Jong-il had identified “audacity” as one of Kim Jong-un’s strengths. Rodong Sinmun editorialist Song Mi-ran described this as follows: “The politics of

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7KBS, Kita-Chosen, Odoroki no Daitenkan, 70.
8“New Year Address of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un for 2019,” Rodong Sinmun, January 1 2019; Isozaki, “Kim Jong’un shinnen no ji’o yomitoku.”
9Based on the testimony of Kim Jong-un’s aunt Ko Yong-suk, who confirmed Kim Jong-un’s year of birth as 1984. Fifield, Anna., “Woman who helped raise dictator lives quietly in U.S.: Kim Jong Un’s aunt left when she feared her usefulness was gone,” The Washington Post Sunday, May 29, 2016, A1, A10.
10Isozaki, “Kim Jong’un taisei no köchiku katei.”
11Isozaki, “A Discourse Analysis on New North Korean Documents Kulloja,” 81–82.
our Dear General (Kim Jong-un) is the kind of politics where not one sector but all fields change in a single breath, where things change not gradually but all at once."

Kim Jong-un has already released close to 200 “works,” such as speeches and statements. Although not all of them are completely available to the public, one can get a glimpse of the extremity of his discourse and the speed of the change by carefully examining these in conjunction with the tone of Rodong Sinmun. An instance that clearly demonstrates this fast-paced approach is the speed with which the regime shifted from a policy of nuclear missile testing, which it followed from January 2016 to November 2017, to a dialog-centered strategy. Although his 2016 New Year’s Day address was laden with venturesome words such as “merciless sacred war of justice” and “great war for national reunification,” by September 2017 when the sixth nuclear test was pushed through, reports on Kim Jong-un’s activities had clearly shifted to focus on the economy and suggested a strategy that anticipated the subsequent diplomatic developments. It was also around this time that the first meeting of the Politburo Presidium that was attended by officials responsible for foreign affairs and economy was held. Although the “new Byeongjin [dual-track] line,” announced by Kim Jong-un in March 2013, combining both economic strengthening and nuclear development, had been positioned as a “permanent policy,” it came to an end with the sudden declaration of “victory” issued in April 2018 in the lead-up to the North Korea–US summit.

The fast pace at which Kim reshuffled his top leadership should also be noted. Looking back on Kim Jong-un’s appearances, he was most often accompanied during 2012, the first year of his administration, by his uncle Jang Song-thaek, Vice Chairman of the National Defence Commission. Undoubtedly, Jang Song-thaek was one of the officials who were closest to Kim at that time. However, by the end of 2013, Jang had been executed for “plotting to overthrow the government.” Previously, there was a complete blackout on reporting around Ri Yong-ho and Hyon Yong-chol, who had both served as chiefs of the General Staff of the KPA, with stories of a purge circulating. In the just over eight years since Kim Jong-un came into office, as of January 2020, there have been four different Directors of the KPA General Political Bureau, seven chiefs of the General Staff, and seven Ministers of the People’s Armed Forces, illustrating the speed with which the top positions have changed hands. Furthermore, although previously these three appointments included full membership of the Politburo as positions within the party, it has since been downgraded to candidate membership; there has been an intentional downgrading of the military and a shift away from the Songun policy, as discussed below as the fifth characteristic.

3 Characteristic II: pragmatism

Another characteristic of Kim Jong-un’s leadership is his tendency toward pragmatism. Kim Jong-un has repeatedly criticized “formalism” during his field inspections. He has

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12 Song Mi-ran, “Jeolmojineun Shidae [Age to be young],” Rodong Shinmun, May 5, 2014.
13 Isozaki, “Kim Jong-un ‘shinnen no ji’ o yomitoku.”
14 “Presidium of Political Bureau of C.C., WPK Held,” Rodong Shinmun, September 4, 2017.
15 “Third Plenary Meeting of Seventh C.C., WPK Held in Presence of Kim Jong-un,” Rodong Shinmun, April 21, 2018.
16 “Report on Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of Central Committee of WPK,” Rodong Shinmun, December 9, 2013; “Traitor Jang Song-thaek Executed,” Rodong Shinmun, December 13, 2013.
17 For example, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un Visits 250-Mile Journey for Learning Schoolchildren’s Palace,” Rodong Shinmun, June 1, 2019; “Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un Looks Round Revolutionary Battle Sites in Mt Paektu Area,” Rodong Shinmun, December 4, 2019.
consistently shunned reports that attempt to paint accomplishments in an excessively rosy light while emphasizing “quality” as well as “quantity” in relation to production quotas. On occasion, he has also given directions on the use of the Internet, which is generally prohibited in North Korea, as a means of obtaining materials from other countries or as a platform for establishing decisive measures to spread ideology and culture.

While visiting a bag factory in Chongjin in July 2018, Kim strongly criticized the North Hamgyong Provincial Party Committee for “working in a formalistic manner.” This criticism of “formalism” has also gone beyond production sites. For example, in a speech at the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces on February 8 2019, the founding anniversary of the KPA, Kim called for the complete elimination of “old remnants like formalistic style and stereotyped patterns in training.”

Furthermore, while inspecting a shoe factory in Wonsan in December 2018, as part of a series of impromptu inspections to grasp the state of the nation firsthand – because officials had been issuing only positive reports – Kim Jong-un was reported as being satisfied with production conditions while commenting figuratively that although his “visit was sudden and unannounced,” it had been “a bumper year for shoes.” There were a number of other impromptu visits to production sites during which Kim expressed his dissatisfaction. He was reported as having become “enraged” at the poor management of water tanks at a terrapin farm in May 2015, as well as upon learning that delays in construction had been ignored at the site of the Orangchon Power Station in July 2018.

In the Supreme People’s Assembly, which is inscribed in the constitution as the highest organ of state power, from the first session of the 13th assembly held in April 2014 onward, speakers began to report not only positive results but also “defects” concerning their departments. Officials are required to give clear details about these “defects,” along with solutions to overcome them. It is hard to imagine the transpiring of the immediate admission and official publicization of the failed satellite launch in April 2012 during Kim Jong-il’s time.

Words such as “reality” also appear in Kim Jong-un’s statements while expressing a loathing for economic conditions that are nothing but slogans and in a pursuit of substantive results. At the 5th Plenary Session of the 7th WPK Central Committee held at the end of 2019, Kim Jong-un is reported to have “seriously summarized implicit biases and essential defects and their underlying causes,” as well as stating “The economic program must proceed with its feet firmly planted in reality” and giving instructions to “explore clear policies for improving the planning program in accordance with realistic conditions.”

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18For example, “Dear Leader Comrade Kim Jong-un Visits Songdowon General Foodstuff Factory,” Rodong Shinmun, July 26 2018; “Dear Leader Comrade Kim Jong-un Visits Wonsan Disabled Soldiers’ Bag Factory,” Rodong Shinmun, July 26, 2018.
19For example, Ri, “Migugi Chuguhaneun Syber Jeonjaengchaekdongui Bandongseong [Reactionary Nature of the Cyber Warfare Pursued by the United States],” 61–63..
20“Dear Comrade Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un Inspects Bag Factory in Chongjin,” Rodong Sinmun, July 17, 2018.
21“Comrade Kim Jong-un, Supreme Leader of Our Party, Country, and Army, Makes a Congratulatory Visit to the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces and a General Speech to Mark the 71st Anniversary of the Founding of the Korean People’s Army,” Rodong Sinmun, February 9, 2019.
22“Dear Comrade Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un Inspected the Wonsan Shoe Factory,” Rodong Sinmun, December 3, 2018.
23“Dear Comrade Kim Jong-un Inspected the Taedong River Terrapin Farm,” Rodong Sinmun, May 19, 2015; “Dear Comrade Kim Jong-un Inspected the Construction Site of the Orangchon Power Station,” Rodong Sinmun, July 17, 2018..
24For example, “Report on 4th Plenary Meeting of 7th Central Committee of WPK,” Rodong Shinmun, April 11, 2019..
25“DPRK’s Satellite Fails to Enter Its Orbit,” KCNA, April 13, 2012..
needs and to decisively strengthen trust in the people’s economic plan by balancing overall production and supply.”

Kim Jong-un’s pragmatic nature can also be seen in various other contexts. From around the autumn of 2016, foreigners were no longer required to pay homage to the large bronze statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il that tower above central Pyongyang. Previously, all foreigners visiting Pyongyang – not only for goodwill visits but for business and sightseeing as well – had to follow the custom of placing flowers in front of the large bronze statues on the Mansudae; now, however, only those who wish to do so make this visit.

A similar move was made for the portrait of Kim Il-sung displayed on the Pyongyang Airport terminal building. When the new terminal was constructed in July 2015, the portrait was no longer displayed in an area where foreign visitors would see it. Given that North Korea attaches great importance to the treatment of its bronze statues and leader portraits, such a policy change, it would seem, could only have been actioned by the Supreme Leader himself. Therefore, these examples can be seen to reflect the pragmatic character of Kim Jong-un.

When traveling to Singapore for the North Korea–US summit in June 2018, Kim Jong-un borrowed a passenger plane from China. In 2014, Kim Jong-un’s private jet “Chammae-1 [Goshawk-1]” had already been unveiled, and it was assumed that Kim would use this to travel abroad. Instead, Kim decided to borrow an aircraft from Air China. Some have speculated that this was done to leverage China’s influence at the time of the meeting with President Trump. However, if Kim’s decision was in fact based on the flying distance of his private jet, it is an indication of his tendency to be pragmatic in putting safety above appearance. In 2014, Kang Sok-ju, Director for International Affairs of the WPK (former Vice Foreign Minister) also noted, “The diplomatic activities conducted by our Dear General (Kim Jong-un) pass on our tradition in terms of content while everything is new in terms of form.”

The fact that Kim began to refer to the direct dialog with the President of the United States as “dealings” is itself more pragmatic than the approach taken by the Kim Jong-il administration, which maintained that it “would not deal” with the United States.

As North Korea’s relations with the South and with the United States have developed, Kim’s intention to defend the northern part of the Korean Peninsula has come to be expressed in even stronger terms. This can be considered a pragmatic move to take the North forward as a nation, separate from the South, given that more than 70 years have passed since the peninsula was divided. In his 2019 New Year’s Day address, Kim referred to “the principle of our state first” instead of “the principle of keeping the Korean people first,” as he had done in previous years. Moreover, during the address, the national flag could be seen in the background as well as the traditional party flag. In other words, it can

26 “Report on 5th Plenary Meeting of 7th C.C., WPK,” Rodong Shinmun, January 1, 2020.
27 Isozaki, Kitachōsen to kankō, 55..
28 “Our Supreme Leader Comrade Kim Jong-un left Pyongyang to have the first meeting with US president,” Rodong Shinmun, June 11 2018..
29 Kang Sok-ju, “Theukchulhan Daewoehwaldongeseo Mannineu Shimjangjeul Ullineun Jeolseeu Uiun [Peerless Great Man Who Moves the Masses through His Special Foreign Activities],” Kulloja, January 2014, 24–26.
30 For example, “DPRK First Vice Foreign Minister Issues Statement,” KCNA, September 9, 2019..
31 “New Year Address of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un for 2019,” Rodong Shinmun, January 1, 2019; Isozaki, “Kim Jong’un ‘shinnen no jî o yomitoku,’ 2019.”
be argued that Kim has shelved the prospect of reunification with the South and is for the time being seeking to maintain de facto international relations to achieve peaceful coexistence. The keywords used in Kim’s New Year addresses suggest that since the opening of dialog with the South in 2018, his use of the word “unification” has become less frequent (see Table 1).32

4. Characteristic III: focus on process

In the Kim Jong-un administration, a new tendency to place greater importance on the policy-making process has become apparent. The party conference of September 2010, during which Kim Jong-un was officially appointed as Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, was the third party conference, and it was the first to be held in 44 years.33 This has been regarded as an attempt to secure “legitimacy” by giving weight, albeit in name alone, to the process of convening the Conference to ensure that Kim Jong-il’s 26-year-old successor, still young and not well-known, would be able to take center stage; after Kim Jong-il died, this focus on process became increasingly pronounced.34

In May 2016, the party congress was held for the seventh time, 36 years after the previous congress in October 1980. Considering that even plenary sessions of the WPK Central Committee were never held during Kim Jong-il’s rule, it indicates a clear tendency to place importance on restructuring the party and on these meetings and procedures. Plenary sessions of the WPK Central Committee were held intermittently, and the “Byeongjin [dual-track] line” was laid out; this was said to have ended in “victory” as it made way for the “new track” in which all efforts were to be focused on the economy.35

In addition to the plenary sessions of the Central Committee, meetings of the WPK Politburo Presidium, Standing Committee of the Politburo Presidium, and Central Military Commission of the WPK are now convened, albeit irregularly, and key decisions are announced at the meetings of the WPK Politburo P. All of the meetings are ceremonial “hand-clapping” affairs, where dissenting opinions are not expressed; they function simply as a means for the upper echelons of party leadership to convey policy matters downward.

When Jang Song-thaek was executed in December 2013, the procedures leading to his execution were announced in part. On December 8, Jang Song-thaek was removed from all his posts and expelled from the WPK following a decision made at an enlarged meeting of the Politburo. On December 12, it was announced that Jang had been sentenced to death by a special military tribunal of the Ministry of State Security and then executed immediately for attempting to overthrow the state, which is a crime punishable according to Article 60 of the Criminal Code. In February 2020, two party vice-chairmen – Ri Man-gon and Pak Thae-dok – were condemned in public at an enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau, and it was announced that they had been dismissed from their posts.36

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32Isozaki, “Kim Jong’un ‘shinnen no ji’ o yomitoku,” 2018.
33Previous party conferences were held in March 1958 and October 1966.
34Party History Institute of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, Joseon Rodongdang Ryeoksa 2, 329–334.
35“Seventh Session of 12th SPA of DPRK Held,” Rodong Shinmun, April 2, 2013; “3rd Plenary Meeting of 7th C.C., WPK Held,” Rodong Shinmun, April 21, 2018.
36“Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of C.C., WPK Held,” Rodong Shinmun, February 29, 2020.
However, even though So Kwan-hui, the WPK Central Committee secretary in charge of agriculture, was said to have been executed during the Kim Jong-il administration, there were no reports of this by the North Korean media. Regarding Kim Il-sung’s leadership, the purge of key officials is mentioned in the party history. This included former prime minister Pak Hon-yong, a political rival of Kim Il-sung, as well as Choe Chang-ik and Pak Chang-ok, who are said to have challenged Kim Il-sung in the August 1956 Plenum Incident. However, at the time, the purging of these officials was not reported in Rodong Sinmun either promptly or in detail.

It is necessary to focus on the manner in which the Kim Jong-un regime releases its news. When Kim Jong-un announces key policies internationally, he tends to differentiate the degree of their importance while employing different outlets to announce the information, in the form of government statements, statements by spokespersons from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, comments by spokespersons from the Ministry, responses by spokespersons from the Ministry, statements and comments by various organizations, comments by the Korean Central News Agency, and individual comments. For example, the series of nuclear missile tests that took place from January 2016 onward began with a “government statement” on January 6 2016, conveying the message that North Korea would steadily strengthen its nuclear arsenal in both quality and quantity. Then a line was drawn under this effort in a “government statement” issued on November 29 2017, stating that the country had “realized the historic task of completing our nuclear armed force.” The announcement of these events through government statements issued at the same level demonstrates a certain logical coherence and recognition of their importance. However, criticism of the United States, expressed in strong terms, is often delivered in a way that provides potential outs, through statements or comments by various organizations or as individual comments.

5. Characteristic IV: obsession with specific issues

Obsession with certain specific issues is perhaps a characteristic of all dictators. National Defence Commission Chairman Kim Jong-il was particular about policies regarding the arts, especially cinema. He also commented on the “politics of music.” Although interest in North Korean art and culture, including film and music, is greater than was the case earlier due to the impact of platforms such as YouTube, the number of films and compositions has in fact fallen considerably since the beginning of the Kim Jong-un era. Kim Jong-un’s areas of concern are apparent from his works and from reports on his activities. These include science and technology, education, children, households.

37Party History Institute of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, Joseon Rodongdang Ryeoks 1, 278–282, 310–316.
38“The DPRK Gouvernment Statement,” Rodong Sinmun, January 7 2016.
39“The DPRK Gouvernment Statement,” Rodong Sinmun, November 29 2017.
40“Kim Jong-un and the 12th Supreme People’s Assembly in September 2012.”
41According to Joseon Rodongdang Ryeoks 2, 396 on January 15 and January 25 2012, shortly after Kim Jong-il’s death, Kim Jong-un issued a comment titled, “We Must Realize the Concept of Prioritizing Science and Technology and Apply Scientific Methods to Production and Construction.”
42Kim Jong-un decided to extend the compulsory period for education from 11 years to 12 years at the 6th Session of the 12th Supreme People’s Assembly in September 2012.
43Kim Jong-un has commented on “families” several times in his New Year’s Day addresses. This is one characteristic that was absent from the words of Kim Jong-il.
and families (orphanages and senior citizen homes), the ilkun, buildings, vehicles, the air force, sports, the Internet, and diversification of foreign trade.

It is also worth noting that Kim Jong-un has commented on world trends on numerous occasions. He has repeatedly emphasized the importance of aiming toward “world standards” and the “cutting edge” in science and technology and various other fields. Remarks related to this point include, “There are many things we can introduce from among the latest developments in the world and foreign countries’ advanced technologies” and “We should learn about the latest world trends and advanced technologies through the Internet and send delegations abroad to learn and collect materials.”

Since 2018, efforts have been made to develop tourist resorts centered on the Wonsan coastal area along the Sea of Japan and hot spring resorts such as Yangdok. After his first field inspection of the Yangdok Hot Springs Tourist Area in August 2018, Kim visited the resort six times before the opening ceremony in December 2019. Because it is rare for the Supreme Leader of North Korea to visit the same place frequently within a short period of time, this is a prime example of Kim Jong-un’s obsession with certain specific issues.

Furthermore, although Kim’s interest was focused on Pyongyang and Wonsan when he came into office, the scope of his movements expanded thereafter and included visits to the Sin’uju region near the border with China.

In relation to his tendency to focus on following due process, Kim Jong-un prefers to preside over the various meetings and conferences that are held. In this respect, he has emphasized continuity from the Kim Il-sung period and, perhaps to stress on the importance of this history, has changed the names of the large-scale meetings known as “conferences” and numbered them; for example, the KWP Conference of Ideological Activists, National Conference of Artists, National Conference of Educational Workers, and Conference of WPK Cell Chairpersons. These conferences, formerly bearing different names, are now addressed with continuity to the past.

6. Characteristic V: departure from Songun politics

In recent years, Kim Jong-un has increasingly distanced itself from the army-first Songun politics that symbolized the Kim Jong-il period. When Kim Jong-un was unofficially appointed as the successor, perhaps to substantiate the idea of military-first Songun politics guided by the party, the military rank of daejang (general) was awarded to several nonmilitary personnel such as Kim Kyong-hui, Choe Ryong-hae, and Jang Song-thaek at the same time as Kim Jong-un, thus reviving the framework of the Central Military Commission of the WPK.

Although the intention for the successor regime to inherit the Songun ideology was made clear at the time, Kim Jong-un no longer mentions Songun. It has not been mentioned in his New Year’s Day addresses since 2018 (see Table 1). The National Defence Commission, which was the command center for the Songun system, was disbanded by an amendment to the Constitution in June 2016; it was replaced by the

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44 For example, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un Has Photo Session with Commanding Officers of KPA Units and Sub-Units Involved in Construction of Yangdok Hot Spring Cultural Recreation Center,” Rodong Shinmun, December 8, 2019.
45 Kim, On Bringing about a Revolutionary Turn in Land Administration in Line with the Demands for Building a Thriving Socialist Country, 23.
46 Isozaki, Kitachōsen to kankō, 93–96.
47 Isozaki, “Kim Jong’un Seiken ni okeru chūsenrodōto chūsuiinkai kikanshi,” 266–270.
48 Isozaki, “Kim Jong’un taisei no kōchiku katet.”
State Affairs Commission, Kim Jong-un, who was earlier the First Chairman of the National Defence Commission, became the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission.

The shift away from *Songun* is evident also from the personnel who accompany Kim Jong-un on his visits to Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where the bodies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il rest. Considering that these memorial visits take place every year on occasions such as New Year’s Day and the birth anniversaries of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, they are useful references to grasp changes over time. Take, for example, the photographs published alongside *Rodong Sinmun* reports on Kim’s visits to the palace on February 16, the birth anniversary of Kim Jong-il. In 2013, all those accompanying him, except Kim’s wife, Ri Sol-ju, and his aunt Kim Kyong-hui, were military personnel; in 2014, as well, shortly after Kim Kyong-hui’s husband Jang Song-thaek was executed, only military personnel appeared in the background. However, in 2017, after the National Defence Commission was disbanded, suited figures were in equal balance with uniformed officials, even while in the midst of nuclear missile development. In 2018, after Kim had introduced a dialog-centered approach toward the South in his New Year’s Day address, military officers vanished from the scene. Because the army is not to be disregarded, this step suggests Kim’s confidence that he has the military in his grip; nevertheless, the shift away from *Songun* is evident.

The eight-year period after Kim Jong-un came into office saw not only a departure from *Songun* but also a shift away from the politics of “*Yuhun* [last instructions],” which leaned on the prestige of the country’s former leaders. Close allies of the leader during the Kim Jong-il period were replaced one after the other. The Director of the KPA’s Propaganda and Agitation Department, Kim Ki-nam, and Chairman of the Supreme People’s Assembly, Choe Thae-bok, who had supported Kim Jong-un in establishing the new regime retired at the 2nd Plenary Session of the 7th WPK Central Committee on October 10 2017, followed by the President of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim Yong-nam, at the 1st Session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly on April 11 2019. In Kim’s 2019 New Year’s Day address, the names of “Kim Il-sung” and “Kim Jong-il” and their honorific titles such as “Great Leader [*Uidaehan Suryeong*]” and “Great General [*Uidaehan Ryeongdoja*]” were no longer mentioned (see Table 1). This suggests a deliberate indication of the arrival of Kim Jong-un’s own new era.

Kim Jong-il defined *Songun* as a mode of leadership that “solves all problems arising in the revolution and construction on the basis of the principle of giving top precedence to military affairs ... putting forward the army as the pillar of the revolution.” This was a change from the system under Kim Il-sung, which was influenced by the Soviet Union and revolved around the Worker’s Party, and in which workers and farmers were central, with slogans such as “military first, workers second” coming into frequent use. However, as Kim Jong-un succeeded Kim Jong-il to power, importance was once again attached to the party organization. This was a move to return the crisis management system established during the “March of Suffering” to a national system that was centered on the party. Although Kim Jong-un continues to advocate the strengthening of the national defense capacity, he has clearly distanced himself from the *Songun* principle.

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49 Isozaki, *Kitachōsen to kankō*, 21–23.
50 Isozaki, “Sendai to Issen-wo Kakushita Dai 7-kai Chosen Rodoto Taikai.”
51 Party History Institute of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, *Uridangeui Songunjeongchi*, 95.
52 Ibid., 163–178.
This implies that North Korea is seeking to return to a party–state system in what is reminiscent of the Kim Il-sung regime or the Soviet regime during the Stalin era.

7. Other considerations: changing directionality of the personality cult

Kim Jong-il’s funeral ceremony was similar to that of Kim Il-sung. It has been established that there was considerable continuity from the previous regime in the early years of the Kim Jong-un administration. When Kim Jong-un came onto the public stage, it was thought that he was deliberately made to resemble Kim Il-sung to enhance his charisma. When Kim Jong-un gave his first speech at a military parade, Korean Central Television announced that he “looked just like Kim Il-sung in the old days.” Honorific epithets, such as “Dear” and “Great” were suddenly showered on Kim Jong-un, and Rodong Sinmun spared no praise for the new leader.

However, as of January 2020 (when this paper was completed), portraits and portrait badges of Kim Jong-un are yet to catch on. Portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are displayed in homes, workplaces, and public spaces in North Korea, but there are no portraits of Kim Jong-un beside them. While it is unclear whether this is for the sake of “humility” or for other reasons, we can see that the personality cult has been subdued to some extent. Meanwhile, a portrait of Kim Jong-un was displayed on the Pyongyang Airport terminal building alongside those of his guests when the President of the Council of State of Cuba Miguel, Diaz-Canel, and the President of China, Xi Jinping, visited North Korea in November 2018 and June 2019, respectively.\(^{53}\) Such actions must now be observed to ascertain whether they become a general, established fixture of the regime.

Kim Jong-un’s birthday (January 8) has not been publicized directly, except for a Rodong Sinmun report stating that the American basketball player Dennis Rodman, who visited North Korea in January 2014, did so “to celebrate the Great Leader’s (Kim Jong-un’s) birthday.”\(^{54}\) Moreover, the year of his birth, which is said to be 1984, has not been revealed at all.

8. Conclusion

This paper has described five characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s leadership: preference for fast-paced action, pragmatism, focus on process, obsession with specific issues, and departure from Songun politics. While there are considerable overlaps with previous studies, as mentioned in the introduction, it is possible to clearly identify aspects that are different from the Kim Jong-il administration. However, all the characteristics identified in this paper can be considered only as provisional extractions, which may change going forward.

The paper first touched on the need to return to the technique of “Pyongyangology.” However, compared to the early days of the administration, there is now a strong tendency for Kim Jong-un’s works to be released not in full but only partially, and the only source that allows for continuous analysis of the Supreme Leader’s remarks is his New Year’s Day addresses.\(^{55}\) Although some progress toward securing a certain – typically North Korean –

\(^{53}\)”Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un Sees Off Miguel Mario Diaz-Canel Bermudez,” Rodong Shinmun, November 7, 2018; “Xi Jinping Arrives in Pyongyang,” Rodong Shinmun, June 21, 2019.

\(^{54}\)”Dear Marshal Comrade Kim Jong-un Watched Basketball Game of DPRK, American Players,” Rodong Shinmun, January 9, 2014.

\(^{55}\)However, there was no New Year’s Day address in 2020, and the Rodong Sinmun dated January 1 instead reported on the 5th Plenary Session of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK, which was held the previous day.
form of transparency was made around the time of Kim Jong-il’s death, including the publication of short biographies of his key executives, in recent times, there has been a considerable swing back to former ways.

While it is now more difficult to examine Kim’s works, there is also more scope for scrutinizing North Korean publications. Articles now include the professional titles of the authors who write them. While this may be an adjustment in line with world trends, this can be considered an indication of Kim Jong-un’s method of holding the ilkun to account being reflected in the publications. Furthermore, the release of expanded editions of all 100 volumes of the Complete Works of Kim Il-sung, published over 20 years, from 1992 onward, unexpectedly began from 2017 on56 A revised edition of the official party history, History of the Workers’ Party of Korea, was also published for the first time in 11 years. In addition to these historical revision activities, publications are thoroughly censored and revised, and all photos showing the purged official Jang Song-thaek have been removed along with photos of Pyongyang Folklore Park, a project that was managed by Jang Song-thaek before his execution57 The founding anniversary of the KPA was changed from April 25 to February 8 for the first time since 197758 This rewriting of history serves as a mark of the dawning of a new era.

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Notes on contributor

Isozaki Atsuhito is an associate professor at Keio University, Yokohama, Japan. His research focuses on contemporary North Korean politics and Japan–North Korea relations. Previously, he served as a special analyst on North Korean politics in the Intelligence and Analysis Service of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was a senior researcher on North Korean politics at the Japanese Embassy in Beijing. In addition to this, he was selected as a Japan Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center. He received his M.A. in Law from Keio University and studied abroad at the Seoul National University. His major publications include: Tourism in North Korea (Mainichi Shimbun Publishing, 2019), New Introduction to North Korean Studies (Co-authored with Sawada Katsumi, Toyo Keizai, 2017), Understanding the North Korean Regime (Woodrow Wilson International Center, 2017).

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57Isozaki, Kitachōsen to kankō, 184..

58”Political Bureau of C.C., WPK Decides to Mark Feb. 8 as KPA Founding Anniversary,” Rodong Shinmun, January 23, 2018..
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