



Monument to the Pochonbo Battle in Hyesan, DPRK: A Few Dozen Meters from the PRC and Well Within China Mobile's Service Zone | Image via Rodong Sinmun, June 4, 2012

With North Korean state media amid what amounts to an information offensive against information leaks from (and [subversive incursions](#) into) North Hamgyong province, This essay, updated and expanded for SinoNK, originally ran on [Destination Pyongyang](#) on July 5. -- Adam Cathcart, Editor

Beware the North Korean Rumor Mill

by Christopher Green

It is no secret that analysts and experts of all ideological hues tend to be suspicious of stories appearing in the media about North Korea. It is a tendency that is not without justification, since published stories from the genre have a long and somewhat undistinguished history of being incorrect. Of course, the very act of being wrong is also to some extent justified, given the North Korean media reality.

Sometimes, problems stem from the desire to attain a certain goal (laudable, in many cases), such as stories about starvation presumably aimed at inspiring the delivery of apolitical food aid to the indisputably hungry (though not starving)

North Korean people (see [this](#) excessive ‘Famine Special’). On other occasions, they come from an inaccurate interpretation of a piece of information received from North Korea that ends with the description of a distorted reality, such as, I strongly suspect, [this](#). On still further occasions, they emerge from the keen commercial desire of sections of the (South Korean, in particular) media to maintain the [illusion](#) of being “No.1 for North Korea News”.

However, what is not noted with anything approaching sufficient frequency is the fact that the North Korean regime is also extremely adept at disinformation. And yet, disinformation from the horse’s mouth is, this author believes, more problematic and potentially disruptive than any other kind.

The following is a story that appeared on the Radio Free Asia (RFA) website on July 3rd. RFA has some great content, but its translations are slow to arrive when they arrive at all, so I have prepared an English version [minus one redundant paragraph: translation mine];

There is a rumor going around that Kim Jong Eun is in favor of the reform and opening of the North Korean economy but is being stopped from so-doing by Jang Sung Taek and Kim Kyung Hee. This news is causing the North Korean people’s dislike of the couple [Jang and Kim are a married couple] to go through the roof.

Reporter Moon Sung Hwee is here with the story.

Moon: Criticism of Kim Jong Eun’s aunt Kim Kyung Hee and her husband Jang is spreading in the markets and in universities, and popular dislike of the two is growing rapidly as a result. This is supposedly because they are implacably opposed to Kim Jong Eun’s plans to reform and open the North Korean economy.

A student from North Hamkyung Province whom I recently spoke to explained, “Kim Jong Eun’s reform and opening plan is not being allowed to reach fruition because of the implacable opposition of Kim Kyung Hee and Jang Sung Taek. This story is whizzing around universities in Pyongyang and the provinces, of course, and also in the markets, and some people are really angry.”

According to the student, Kim planned to make the complete reform of farming and the military his first job following the death of Kim Jong Il, and had made implementation plans.

[The report then goes on to discuss the ways in which Kim hoped (and may still hope) to carry out military and agricultural reform. This includes military modernization (including troop number and military service length reductions). Notably, he also apparently strongly believes in the need to follow the Chinese road in agriculture so as to solve food insecurity issues.]

However, when she heard about Kim’s ideas, Kim Kyung Hee reportedly

demanded of him, “Would you, in the fourth generation, discard the ‘juche agricultural law’ and ‘military-first political line’ made by my father Premier Kim Il Sung and adhered to by my brother NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il?”

“You will not abandon socialism for as long as I live,” she apparently went on to declare, and husband Jang declared that rapid reform could lead to regime collapse.

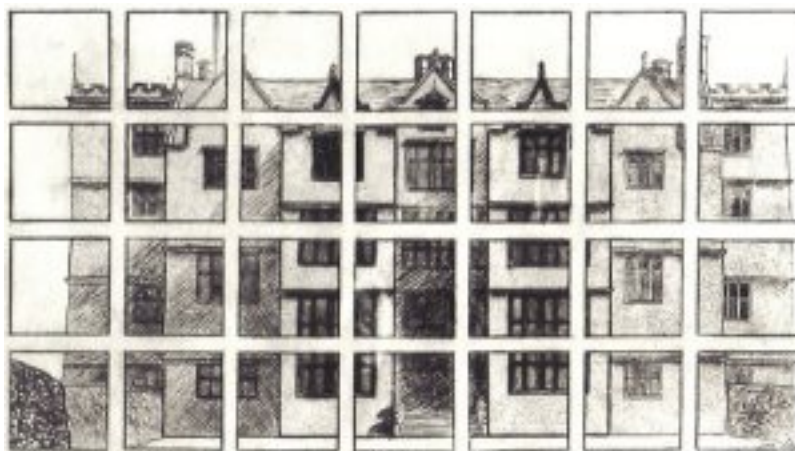
(As with all quotes in all articles in all Korean print and online media all the time, the precise accuracy of this quote has to be regarded with circumspection. Anyway, onward...)

However, a Party cadre source in Yangkang Province, while agreeing that the story is indeed going around, added, “For one thing, we don’t know if that is a true story, and even if it is a true story we cannot say for sure when it took place. And, even if it did happen, doubts still exist over the way it leaked out.”

Nevertheless, “The unconfirmed rumor is circulating, and the people’s feelings towards Kim Kyung Hee and Jang Sung Taek are worsening greatly,” the cadre source continued. “People who know well how people’s minds work may very well have leaked the rumor in order to try and restrain Jang Sung Taek.”

It is clear from the outset that this article is no guide whatsoever to government policy, nor that it is meant to be. It is premised on an (almost certainly) baseless rumor going around in the markets of Yangkang Province, from whence its author hails, and it only cites one source. The author, Moon Sung Hwee, makes little secret of these facts.

The problem is that readers outside North Korea are not always aware of from where or by what means such stories often emerge.



Disparate Data Points: Telling the Whole Story?

The Fragmented Architecture of North Korean News | It is important to note that what we (with "we" meaning any group trying to get news out of North Korea) are working with is, in truth, a pretty fragile piece of newsgathering architecture. In the classic format, the words of a source are received by phone or text message, and those words are then both tested for credibility by people with knowledge of how North Korea tends to operate and cross-checked with other sources from the same region or, in the case of big stories, areas nationwide.

While much of the information that emerges in this way comes from relatively well-connected sources such as Chosun Workers' Party cadres of good standing who want the truth to be heard or from Chinese-Korean traders who are privy to more information than most people due to their relative ease of movement, much of the rest is derived from conversations held in local markets or received from sources with less pure motives (or both). A lot will also be hearsay received at three, four or ten times remove.

This state of affairs is extremely open to North Korean abuse. North Korea is known to actively operate on the premise that a well-timed declaration in the market in Hyesan, Shinuiju or Namyang can arrive on the pages of Chosun Ilbo or, as in this case, Radio Free Asia in a heartbeat. From there, of course, rumor gains its own currency, and eventually becomes fact. Before you know it, it is a feature article in the New York Times and informing government policy inside the Beltway.

The aim of such disinformation is not just to misinform the international community, either. In a country like North Korea, where lateral and downward flows of information are deliberately impeded as a matter of state policy, methods of affecting public opinion outside the limited strictures of the state media are in very short supply.



Public, Private; Within, Without; Different Directions?

Rumors as Factional Maneuvering | What this means is that when one party wishes to constrain the actions of another party, whomever each may be, one of the best ways to do so is by word-of-mouth. Ergo, as the cadre in the RFA article points out, “People who know well how people’s minds work may very well have leaked that rumor in order to try and restrain Jang Sung Taek.” This domestic imperative incentivizes disinformation flows, and makes it even harder for people both within and without the country to work out what is true, and what is not.

You may be wondering what the spreading of this particular rumor could have been intended to achieve? Here are a few quick ideas;

1) It could have been put out by the government itself, acting with the full knowledge of Kim Jong Eun, Jang Sung Taek and Kim Kyung Hee, to make sure that the development of Kim Jong Eun’s public image as a ‘man of the people’ is not damaged by the state’s failure to meet the reformist expectations of the public (i.e. “Kim really wanted reform because he loves you people so much, but those assholes Jang and Kim stopped him doing it”); or

2) It could have been released by someone from within the Cabinet, which is meant to control the civilian economy but does not completely do so, in order to raise public expectations of reform and force the government and military in that direction, a move which can then be attributed to Kim Jong Eun’s determined leadership later on (i.e. “That couple Jang and Kim wanted to stop the leader reforming the nation out of his boundless love for the people, but he would not be stopped and now he has won!”); or

3) It could have been the government wanting to convince the international community that there is a dispute in the North Korean elite between reformers and conservatives in the hope that this will lead governments in Seoul, Washington, Tokyo, Moscow and Beijing to lend a supporting hand to the government on the premise that giving aid and development assistance on a massive scale will help to buttress the influence of the reformist wing (i.e. “Let’s conspire to convince our dumbass neighbors that there is a fight for influence in Pyongyang, and that only by their giving aid for the sake of those of us who want to open the country will they be able to help us face down the conservatives. Everybody in?”)

Gunplay in Pyongyang? | To reiterate, this is not just something that happens with market rumors, either. One would be wise to take with a pinch of salt even those stories that emerge from government sources, too. Take a look at the recent tale of a gunfight during the sacking of V. Mar Lee Young Ho from his Party posts last weekend.

The “facts” as [reported](#) by Chosun Ilbo are that, following the ruling clique (taken to mean Kim Jong Eun, Jang Sung Taek, Kim Kyung Hee and, to a lesser extent, Choi Ryong Hae)’s decision to remove Lee, V. Mar Choi Ryong Hae was sent to

deliver the bad news. His attempts to follow through on this inspired a firefight with Lee loyalists during which as many as 20 people were killed.

While I cannot discount the possibility that this story is true, there are a great many reasons to suspect that it is, in fact, not. First, my own subsequent inquiries have not turned up a single western source in Pyongyang who so much as heard, first or second hand, about the firefight until told that it had made the front page of the Chosun Ilbo.

Second, the final sentence of the piece tells me that even the Chosun Ilbo itself was keen to hedge against the the story turning out to be junk. Any time a piece on North Korea concludes with a paragraph like, “The firefight has still not been 100 percent confirmed,’ said a government official here. ‘It may take some time for us to gain a clearer picture of what happened’,” it is usually wise to be suspicious.

So, if this is not true either, where did it come from and why was it released? Well, assuming that it was based on genuine information obtained from a genuine source in Pyongyang to begin with, rather than 1) simply being made up by a Chosun Ilbo reporter to maintain that particular newspaper’s reputation; or 2) based on information made up and disseminated by the South Korean intelligence services for the purpose of promoting the Lee Myung Bak administration’s own inter-Korean agenda, the question is why the North Korean government would want the outside world to believe that a firefight had occurred.

In short, it was clearly intended to intimate the presence of a very serious schism in the regime. Therefore, the goal is the same as objective 3) for the RFA story.

One need not be in possession of exceptional strategic genius to have worked out that following his shock removal, V. Mar Lee would be described in South Korea and elsewhere as a hardliner and core proponent of the military-first policy, and thus that it would be assumed that his removal represented an attempt to force change against the wishes of the military elite (remember, everyone already knows that V. Mar Choi Ryong Hae is a “civilian” (misguidedly assumed to mean liberal) in a military uniform).

Equally, such information implies that Kim is working hard to take full control of the military, but also insinuates that this is not an easy task and that he needs regional circumstances to remain placid in order to allow him to play his Party-centered hand against the weight of a People’s Army built up over the course of 17 long, military-first years.

Ergo, “Be nice to me, I’m trying to change. Oh, and perhaps you might consider a policy review?”

I do not claim to know in the case of either story what is right or wrong, or even to present a comprehensive list of possible North Korean aims. I’m not even

prepared to rule out the possibility that both stories are true (although they do contradict each other in their judgment of the nature of Jang Sung Taek and Kim Kyung Hee, making this outcome highly unlikely). Nor am I here to point the finger of doubt at Moon Sung Hwee, who is a friend and someone I respect, or at the Chosun Ilbo, which I believe mostly does its best to provide “news” on a country to which it cannot ordinarily gain access.

No: my only point is to say once again that the ‘North Korea newsgathering structure’ is, by necessity, designed in such a way that it is open to exploitation by the North Korean government and its affiliates both more, and in more ways, than by any other group. Do not begin to imagine they haven’t thought of this, and are not trying to use it to their advantage. Read and analyze with great care.

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