

STRENGTHENING KIM JONG-UN'S CULT OF PERSONALITY IN NORTH KOREA THROUGH MEDIA CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

Propaganda, censorship, and excessive control are mechanisms used by a totalitarian regime to consolidate the image of the leader and legitimize his power over the country and its people. North Korea finds itself among the countries that use these instruments to strengthen Kim Jong-Un's cult of personality. This article¹ examines strategies for conveying the leader's portrait by analyzing press material published by the North Korean news agency, The Pyongyang Times. It discusses the phenomenon's context while addressing a contemporary publication packed with stylistic tools meant to enrich the leader's image in the eyes of North Koreans and internationally.

Keywords: *cult of personality, propaganda, Kim Jong-Un, North Korea, media.*

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Introduction

The cult of personality is a phenomenon of political and social propaganda, used since ancient times, which involves "a situation in which people are encouraged to show extreme enthusiasm and love for a famous person, especially a political leader" (OLD). Thus, through the cult of personality, a leader is glorified and deified through means such as propaganda and excessive control over information. The phenomenon occurs in totalitarian regimes where various psychological tools are used to consolidate the image of the supreme leader and to induce the population to unconsciously follow orders without inquiring into the real situation. Following World War II, the Korean Peninsula was divided into two parts, with the northern part placed under Soviet control. Thus, in 1948, a totalitarian regime was established in North Korea after the formation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a regime that continues to this day. The cult of personality in North Korea manifested itself through means common to other dictatorships, such as media control, censorship, excessive control, visual propaganda, and the deification of the leader. However, while in other countries where the cult of personality is manifested, the origins of the leader were usually common, with the leader climbing the social ladder and gaining access to great power, in North Korea, the origins of the leaders are shrouded in myths, legends, and mysteries that shock the public, attract attention, and provoke various reactions internationally.

This article aimed to analyze how media control has contributed to the consolidation of Kim Jong-Un's cult of personality in North Korea. The approach offered a diachronic perspective, tracing the evolution of the phenomenon and propaganda mechanisms since the establishment of Kim Il-Sung's regime in 1948, followed by the reigns of Kim Jong-Il and currently Kim Jong-Un.

To achieve the article's aim, we examined the methods of censorship and the propaganda mechanisms present in all aspects of North Korean citizens' lives. This analysis of historical data and North Korean media discourse provided an overview of the cult of personality in North Korea and answered the following research question: What impact does censorship have on consolidating Kim Jong-Un's cult of personality?

Therefore, this article highlights specific instances of censorship and propaganda in the media to capture how they have contributed to the consolidation of

the cult of personality in North Korea. The proposed text was sourced from North Korean media outlets available to the international public, reflecting how propaganda is introduced into people's lives through these channels. Therefore, this paper illustrates how strict control over media information contributes to the consolidation of the cult of personality in North Korea during the Kim Jong-Un era, studying the mechanisms by which propaganda influences people's opinions and the social reality.

Propagandistic discourse in North Korean state media during Kim Jong-Un's rule

As mentioned earlier, the cult of personality is unique to the North Korean political regime and appears in many aspects of citizens' lives. This includes visual symbols like paintings, statues, or even flowers dedicated to leaders, as well as censored media articles and controlled discussions. These methods are just part of the broader strategies used to portray the leader as the supreme, perfect, and essential figure of the nation. Since the regime's founding, shaping an idealized image of the leader has been a key focus of the ideology. Over time, the techniques for strengthening the cult of personality have changed with each leader but have consistently served as a strong tool for maintaining societal control. This article examines passages from the official North Korean press to reveal how the image of leader Kim Jong-Un is reflected. Through this analysis, we identify and interpret the strategies in the discourse and rhetoric used to reinforce the cult of personality. Among others, this paper looks at linguistic patterns, specific phrases, repetitions, hyperbole, superlatives, recurring themes, and other methods that help legitimize the leader power.

In this context, media outlets such as Rodong Sinmun, the Korean Central News Agency, and The Pyongyang Times are the main channels through which the leader's image is conveyed to shape public perception in accordance with ideological goals. The articles published by these media outlets are heavily regulated and censored to depict a positive, ideal, essential, and all-present image of Kim Jong-Un and to prevent any deviation, opposition, or rebellion against the regime. Additionally, since North Korea has no independent press, citizens accept the disseminated information as the absolute truth, as they lack access to alternative sources of information sources.

Therefore, information is strictly controlled, and the population has limited access based on regulations

set by the party. Access to the internet and foreign information is restricted, with most people only able to use the internal network, which features a selection of approved websites. As a result, North Korean citizens live within a restricted information environment, having their perception of reality shaped around Kim Jong-Un. The powerful censorship system creates an ideal setting for the growth of a totalitarian narrative in which the leader is deified.

Kim Jong-Un is a central figure in any context, whether we discuss official visits, interactions with citizens, inspections at factories or construction sites, or participation in official parades. Articles published after these events describe the leader in highly laudatory terms, using repetitive language that relies on hyperbole and superlatives. Over time, the media has created and reinforced an image of an exceptional leader, a brilliant military strategist, and a ruler with a deep understanding who listens to the needs of the people. This discourse aims to portray an ideal leader, legitimize his power, and grant him authority and respect both among North Korean citizens and Western audiences. Therefore, propaganda discourse is not confined to the domestic sphere but also extends beyond North Korea's borders, shaping perceptions of the regime internationally (Gause, 2006). The passages analyzed were taken from official North Korean websites and provide an important perspective on the mechanisms behind cultivating the cult of personality, as well as on how the regime constructs external perceptions world.

To build this chapter and identify the mechanisms used in the North Korean press, we employed a qualitative approach, specifically discourse analysis, which helped identify symbols, methods of idealizing the leader, and tools used to construct his image. Whether portraying the supreme leader, the leader with the people, or the leader in an international context, the selected texts emphasize his qualities and contributions to his country, as well as significant moments in the regime's history focusing on the successors Kim Jong-Il and Kim Il-Sung. After analyzing the passages, numerous propaganda mechanisms were identified, including: presenting the leader as a father figure, military strategist, genius, and savior of the North Korean people; using propagandistic language; and employing narratives in articles centered on Kim Jong-Un. By uncovering these propaganda tools, we highlighted the impact of the cult of personality on citizens and how media discourse contributes to shaping and reinforcing an idealized image of both the leader and the Juche ideology².

"The press is the party's sharpest weapon. The press is the means by which the party speaks to the masses every hour of the day and speaks in their language." This was Stalin's "teaching" that underpinned the organization of the media in countries behind the Iron Curtain (Tiu, 108). This section provides insight into the strategies used, highlighting the importance and prevalence of the cult of personality in the lives of North Korean citizens. Based on concrete content, it is evident that Kim Jong-Un's image is glorified in the public sphere, while state publications present only an idealized version of the leader. The article selected for this analysis was chosen for its relevance and focuses on the current leader's public activities, his presence at events, and his official speeches. The article illustrates linguistic and stylistic notions, various themes, and discourse narratives that contribute to the representation of Kim Jong-Un as the supreme figure of North Korea.

The selected sources are official North Korean media channels whose publications undergo numerous filters before dissemination. The Pyongyang Times is a weekly news channel dedicated to the international audience, promoting a type of external propaganda. This source also promotes the glorification of the leader, the celebration of domestic achievements, and sustainability and self-sufficiency through propaganda that reflects the cult of personality. Overall, these forms of media help to consolidate a homogeneous, repetitive, and laudatory propaganda discourse about the leader, presenting him as an indispensable figure to the state.

To highlight the mechanisms of propaganda discourse, this section focuses on the strategies that shape the image of the leader as the nation's protector. Propaganda discourse is marked by rhetoric and hyperbole, methods characteristic of totalitarian regimes. The role of media articles is not only informative, but rather to glorify the leader, thus illustrating the image of a strong political ruler, a symbol of the state and national ideals. After analyzing these texts, we identified various methods that contribute to the development of the cult of personality. These strategies include: laudatory and hyperbolic language, portraying the leader in multiple guises (ideologist and demigod, father figure and protector of the nation, military strategist, absolute ruler, etc.), repetition, numerous epithets, attribution of absolute merits, emotional language, cosmic references, or references to the founding myth.

² A political philosophy based on independence, autonomy, and confidence in one's own abilities.

Analysis of the article belonging to The Pyongyang Times news agency

This article, which illustrates strategies for strengthening the cult of personality, is published in The Pyongyang Times, a weekly newspaper dedicated to international readers, as it is printed in English. The newspaper also has an online news page, and the article selected for this analysis is entitled: "Inauguration Ceremony of Regional-industry Factories in Jaeryong County Held" (The Pyongyang Times, 2025). The article's title summarizes its content and briefly describes the event, but does not include the leader's name or any references to the leader, which are included in the subtitle and the rest of the article. The article reports on the great leader's participation in the inauguration ceremony, on how those around him reacted to seeing him, and on his visit to the factories and his analysis of production. This article illustrates how the official press in North Korea transforms a seemingly mundane event into a celebration of the supreme leader. The leader's image is constructed and reinforced through a series of discourse strategies specific to the cult of personality.

Firstly, an indispensable element in consolidating the cult of personality around Kim Jong-Un is the centralization of all achievements on his account. The article suggests that this industrial revolution and revitalization of regional industry are happening thanks to Kim Jong-Un: "a great revolution which can be made only by Kim Jong-Un"; "the great painstaking efforts that Kim Jong-Un has made to bring about transformation" (The Pyongyang Times, 2025). These phrases imply that change has been achieved solely through the leader's will and exceptional abilities. Through this strategy, all the regime's successes are attributed to the leader, to enhance his image as a ruler, while the rest of the citizens merely carry out his will. These exceptional achievements are also associated with the leader and presented in laudatory language that uses superlatives and various epithets to convey the message to readers. Thus, expressions such as "a year of great turn," "a wonderful reality," "a great inspiring event," "the outstanding leader," and "outstanding ideology and theory" are identified (The Pyongyang Times, 2025). These epithets exaggerate the features of the event and of the leader to emphasize reality and highlight an image as close to perfection as possible. Thus, the inauguration of local factories coincides with a unique event in the context of a propaganda speech. This laudatory language is also an ideological tool and

strategy for rewriting reality to convey a particular image of the leader.

Another strategy for consolidating the cult of personality that The Pyongyang Times news agency uses is to portray the leader as a protective parent and caring leader. From the very first paragraphs of the article, it is reported that, upon his arrival at the ceremony, the leader was greeted with cheers and applause from those attending. These displays of veneration for the leader continue even after he cuts the ribbon, and the participants seem to show their gratitude to the supreme leader. He is called "the great father" and "the benevolent leader," appellations that remain in people's subconscious and create an image of a parent-leader whose concerns extend beyond politics and economics to the welfare of the citizens under his command. Thus, a totalitarian but also protective figure is constructed. In addition, reference is made to the traditional values of the Korean people, specifically filial piety, which requires descendants to respect and care for their parents. The leader assumes the goal of the people's happiness and well-being, and his gestures and efforts are interpreted as sacrifices for the citizens.

In other words, the fact that the leader personally participates in this event and does not choose to send someone else to officiate at the inauguration is another strategy that underscores Kim Jong-Un's omnipresence. His physical presence emphasizes that he is consistently with his citizens. Additionally, the fact that he cuts the ribbon symbolizes that things begin with him and that he ensures continuity in this regional industrial development process. Every comment or suggestion the leader makes while analyzing production becomes the main guideline for employees. The leader inaugurates production, supervises it, and guides it. By offering new directions for action, the leader can be seen as a visionary who anticipates the country's needs. The article suggests that the great leader Kim Jong-Un is more than just a political manager; he is above political structures and spreads ideology each time he participates in such events that place him in the spotlight. Additionally, his actions are met with enthusiasm: "When Kim Jong Un arrived at the venue of the ceremony, all the participants raised enthusiastic cheers, extending the greatest glory and respect to the outstanding leader and great father who opened up a new era in which the whole country develops" (The Pyongyang Times, 2025). The article presents the participants' reaction at the event as one of emotion, intended to express appreciation and submission to the leader. The participants share the same feelings, which connect them into a unified group expressing their gratitude to the great leader. Additionally, the person who

steps up to give a speech in honor of the factory's opening first shares his overwhelming emotion and states that this achievement could only have been made by Kim Jong-Un and solely through his efforts. The article also mentions how the participants burst into cheers of joy: "All participants extended grateful thanks to the benevolent leader of the people" (The Pyongyang Times, 2025). The reactions are reported to demonstrate that this adoration of the leader is unanimous among the population and to show international readers that citizens respect their commander. Thus, the text repeatedly indicates that the expected reaction to the leader's presence is loyalty and gratitude for his involvement, without which there would have been no progress. Also, at the end of the article, it is mentioned once again that the leader's participation is a momentous occasion that instills confidence in a guaranteed victory and optimism among the people of the country (The Pyongyang Times, 2025).

In addition, the article from The Pyongyang Times is accompanied by suggestive photos taken during the inauguration ceremony. The article contains 19 images, and the leader Kim Jong-Un appears in 16 of them, each time surrounded by officials or factory employees. The large number of photos featuring the great leader is, in

itself, a strategy to consolidate the cult of personality, as it shows the importance the people attach to him and also that he is an omniscient and omnipresent figure. The photos are relevant to analyzing the cult of personality because they visually illustrate the strategies described in the article. Thus, whether the images show a mise-en-scène in which the leader is the visual center, a crowd of people with North Korean flowers and flags, or the leader immortalized inaugurating the ceremony or among workers, all these poses highlight his qualities as a leader and the appreciation of the people around him. The photographs contribute to a propaganda discourse in which the figure of the leader is central and associated with change, personal sacrifice, and the welfare of the people. The relationship between Kim Jong-Un and the other participants is presented as hierarchical in all the images. Whether he is in the middle of a speech or giving instructions, the others listen to him and take on board the leader's suggestions, who is presented as the sole source of knowledge. He is pictured listening attentively to what employees have to say and interacting directly with the products, which underscores his desire to be involved at every stage.



The image shows the front page of The Pyongyang Times newspaper. The main title is "Inauguration ceremony of regional-industry factories in Jaeryong County held". Below the title, a subtitle reads "The respected Comrade Kim Jong Un attends ceremony, cuts inauguration tape". The page features two large photographs: one showing a large crowd of people waving North Korean flags and another showing Kim Jong Un cutting a red ribbon with other officials. The newspaper's logo and name are at the top, along with the date "No. 2(3 351) Sat, January 11 2025".

The image above is a screencap of the front page of The Pyongyang Times, featuring the article in question. This screencap includes the article's title and subtitle, along with two representative photographs depicting strategies for consolidating Kim Jong-Un's cult of personality. A first aspect worth mentioning is that the leader is referred to by his full title: "Respected Comrade Kim Jong-Un" (The Pyongyang Times, 2025), and that his name is set in a larger font than the rest of the subtitle to stand out. The first photo on the left shows the leader in the middle of the stage, surrounded by a crowd waving flags and bouquets in his honor. The photo depicts a process of leader veneration where citizens express loyalty and respect. It also reflects Juche ideology and patriotism. The second image is a close-up showing the leader with several officials as he cuts the ribbon to inaugurate the ceremony. The leader is the focus; he's leading a new era of development. The officials' eyes are on him, and his presence turns an ordinary event into a moment of almost historic importance. Kim Jong-Un's central position in both photos highlights that the state revolves around his figure, shaping the cult of personality.

Results

The analysis of the selected article from The Pyongyang Times shows how North Korean media helps build Kim Jong-Un's personality cult. The passages depict the leader in various roles, whether as a military genius, a caring parent, or a skilled diplomat. These portrayals serve as propaganda tools that suggest he is all-knowing and always present in every part of his followers' lives. The strategies used in the article—such as laudatory and emotional language, various epithets, repetitions, hyperbole, superlatives, traditional Korean values, national symbols, and the way events are described—are all forms that shape the propaganda discourse. Whether the leader is visiting a military base, factories, or participating in a diplomatic event, his actions are portrayed using the strategies mentioned earlier to craft the image of a strong and dedicated leader who meets his responsibilities and remains connected to his people, as well as to his international partners. This article was carefully reviewed and written in honor of the leader, ensuring that nothing that could harm his image reaches the North Korean media.

Complementing these discourse strategies, the article is accompanied by suggestive photographs that reinforce the message and enhance the significance of the events. This visual approach helps legitimize the leader's power while also showing readers worldwide the

close bond between the great leader and the people or between him and other world leaders. The photos depict homogeneous crowds showing respect for the leader, emotional reactions from citizens, and interactions between the esteemed comrade and officials. Therefore, North Korean media functions not only as a source of information but also as a key tool in building the cult of personality that justifies power and shapes perceptions of the internal and external collective. The glorifying discourse combined with visual elements creates an image of a leader who embodies qualities of a military figure, diplomat, dedicated manager, and national guardian watching over his citizens. Consequently, these written and visual representations help sustain the socialist regime in North Korea.

Conclusions

This paper aims to illustrate how Kim Jong-Un's cult of personality is built and sustained in North Korea through the media. The cult of personality is a defining element of North Korea's socio-political system, which helps legitimize the leader's absolute power and foster loyalty. Through discursive analysis, we identified the mechanisms of propaganda and dissemination of the cult of personality evident in press articles.

The findings provide an initial insight into how North Korean media institutions construct and uphold the cult of personality. The regime uses these tools strategically to foster citizen loyalty, suppress opposition, and strengthen the socialist regime. These mechanisms make the cult of personality a tool of control, constantly injecting fear and manipulation into people's lives. This analysis explores various discourses and narratives that justify the leader's absolute authority, while also impacting citizens physically, psychologically, and socially. In North Korea, propaganda tools maintain control over the population through subtle yet effective methods that remain relevant today.

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