

Problems with Institutionalizing the April 15 Literary Production Unit

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Abstract

This paper examines a group of North Korean writers known collectively as the April 15 Literary Production Unit (LPU), a group that is not well known outside of South Korean scholarship. The April 15 LPU's most important task was the production of the Immortal History series and the Immortal Leadership series, a task that continues to this day. Kim Jong Il personally designed and established the April 15 LPU in the mid-1960s, selecting veteran writers from the Writers Union. Their task was to novelize the revolutionary history of Kim Il Sung in a multi-volume series. In the DPRK, the Immortal History series and the Immortal Leadership series are considered unparalleled masterpieces compared to works written about Mao in China and Stalin in the Soviet Union. However, it would be shortsighted to assume that all writers in the Writers Union and the April 15 LPU are blind advocates of the legend of Kim Il Sung. The road to institutionalizing a group of writers solely for Kim's personality cult was never smooth, and writers in both the Union and the April 15 LPU have struggled with the new writing system in the DPRK.

Keywords: North Korea, literature, Writers Union, April 15 Literary Production Unit, Immortal History series, personality cult of Kim Il Sung

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Introduction

The production of Kim Il Sung's personality cult became widespread in mainstream fiction in the 1970s as a result of the institutionalization of a new group of writers *par excellence* called the April 15 Literary Production Unit (4.15 Munhak Changjakdan), which still exists today in the DPRK. The writers of the April 15 Literary Production Unit (hereafter, April 15 LPU) were not overly enthusiastic about having to write novels that solely depicted the life of the leader. My aim in this article is to reveal the resistance and wariness found among the writers of the April 15 LPU and in the enterprise of creating the official hagiography of Kim Il Sung novelized in the series called "Immortal History" (*Bulmyeol-ui ryeoksa*), which began publication in 1972.

While the April 15 LPU is nominally a sub-division of the Writers Union, the group's sole task of constructing a fictionalized hagiography of Kim Il Sung places it at an elite position in the Union, securing it certain privileges such as higher wages, better food rations, and improved living conditions. Compared to its counterparts in the Soviet Union under Stalin and China under Mao, the success in establishing a group of writers like the April 15 LPU was unique to the DPRK.

I am not concerned with debunking the official history of the revolutionary activity of Kim Il Sung during the Japanese colonial period or during the Korean War as recorded by the Party, nor with revealing the so-called truth behind Kim's rise to power. Much of this sort of criticism has already been studied to a great extent by South Korean scholars, most notably in a collection of essays titled, *Bukhan-ui munhwa jeongjeon, chongseo bulmyeol-ui ryeoksa-reul ingneunda* (North Korea's Cultural Canon: Reading the Immortal History Series, 2009) and Seonu Sang-yeol's *Gwangbok hu bukhan hyeondae munhak yeongu* (A Study of Modern North Korean Literature After Liberation, 2002) and by scholars like Dae-sook Suh and Charles Armstrong. Instead, I am more inclined to agree with Suh's position on Kim Il Sung's historical achievements, where in *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*, he writes, "Exaggeration and unsubstantiated claims not only obscure his true record but also do disservice to him, for his true record is

impressive. Kim can claim a place in the annals of modern Korea for what he has achieved without fabricating spectacular feats” (Suh 1988, 322). Thus, I find it pertinent to avert the focus from the hyperbolized depictions of Kim Il Sung in works of fiction and consider the personal struggles of the writers, who were commissioned to invent the legend of the great revolutionary exploits of the Great Leader.

My contribution to the study of the April 15 LPU is to examine the tacit resistance and reluctance Kim Jong Il faced from the April 15 LPU writers in the process of institutionalizing the new group, resistance that is not so well known to scholars outside of Korea. The road to consolidating, systematizing, and maintaining a group commissioned to write solely about the leader’s revolutionary history was not welcomed with enthusiasm among the writers in the Union. Rather, some writers were reluctant to become members of the April 15 LPU, and once they were recruited, each writer struggled to devise a narrative that met Kim Jong Il’s criteria. It would, therefore, be reductive to assume that all writers in the April 15 LPU were and still are blind advocates of the legend of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un.

Systematizing the Discourse about the Legend

In the late 1970s, the DPRK revised its historiography to lay more emphasis on the year 1932. The year 1932 was to be acknowledged as the *immortal year* for North Koreans, for it was during this period that Kim Il Sung established the only *true* national liberators (the Manchurian faction), who combated the Japanese colonialists. The year 1932 marked the origin and birth of the legend of the Great Family of the DPRK, despite the fact that the North Korean nation had until then been celebrating the liberation day on August 15 and the inauguration of the Korean People’s Army on February 8. In short, the DPRK’s historical revision declared that the establishment of the nation uncontestedly occurred in 1932 with the establishment of Kim Il Sung’s Manchurian guerrilla faction, which victoriously eliminated the Japanese colonialists. This historical revision was based on two

interrelated motives: heavy nationalism and measured diplomatic dependence on the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

One of the most critical conditions that led to this revision was the precarious position the DPRK found itself in during the Sino-Soviet conflict in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Soviet advisors worked with the North Korean security forces from the beginning of the occupation and supplied arms to the Koreans and trained them in their use (Armstrong 2003, 233). During the Korean War, China provided military assistance and moral support to the DPRK, cementing a "comrade-in-arms" relationship (Koh 1969, 941). When the Soviet Union and China drifted apart because of contrasting dogmatic interpretations of Marxism-Leninism, nationalism, and power struggles over satellite communist countries, the DPRK was faced with tenuous diplomatic relations (Scalapino 1964, 6). While it claimed to be neutral in the Sino-Soviet split, the DPRK continued to support China by modeling its economic programs after those of China, such as the Great Leap Forward, which was implemented during North Korea's Chollima campaign (Bradbury 1961, 18).

Amid international tensions, the DPRK sought methods to unify the people and protect the state from internal dissension and confusion. At the Fifteenth Plenary Meeting of the Fourth Central Committee in 1967, the Workers' Party officially established three components: first, Juche ideology as the only political doctrine in the DPRK; second, Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerrilla exploits in the 1930s as the only foundation of DPRK history; and third, the monolithic system (*yuil chegye*) as the code of regulations that made Kim Il Sung the one and only leader of the DPRK. All three components affected the political, social, historical, and cultural dimensions of the DPRK, but the monolithic system has had the greatest impact on public discourse and public consciousness.

The primary purpose of the monolithic system was to create a completely Kim Il Sung-centric political, cultural, and social system, which was the Party's way of eliminating differences and dissenting voices that posed threats to or undermined the singularity of Kim Il Sung and his family's hagiography. As much as purging opposing political factions was necessary for Kim Il Sung to centralize his partisan group (particularly during

the Sino-Soviet split), the need to institutionalize a monolithic system was equally, if not, more important for developing his cult of personality.

In preparation for the monolithic system, Kim Jong Il launched one of the single-most important cultural projects in the mid-1960s: an institution to systematize the production of his father's personality cult through literature. Kim Jong Il says:

I felt more keenly than ever that the development of a new revolutionary literature with the creation of an artistic image of the leader of the working class as its focus and kernel is the most urgent task faced at the moment in the domain of literature and art, a task which will not brook a moment's delay (Kim Jong Il 1967b, 234).

Kim Jong Il's sense of urgency to develop his father's cult of personality may have derived from the need to concretize a unified historicity, a grand narrative describing the origins of the nation, the leader, the Party, and the loyal citizens of the working class. Amid the Sino-Soviet rift and internal political factions, Kim Jong Il felt the need to efface the founding of the DPRK in 1948, as this had happened with the assistance of the Soviet Union, and to instead establish his father's guerrilla activities in 1932 in order to promote him as the uncontested and unassisted founder of the DPRK. Kim Jong Il took it upon himself to officially oversee and facilitate the production of his father's legend.

In the formative years of the DPRK, disparate and inconsistent accounts of the anti-Japanese struggle existed. According to the South Korean scholar Yu Im-ha (2009, 105), Kim Il Sung's alleged memoirs stood on one side of the historical account and the memoirs of other participants in the anti-Japanese struggle stood on the other. Although these accounts conflicted, the DPRK published these memoirs in the 1950s and 1960s because they served to affirm nationalistic pride and socialism in the readers. These participants were national heroes, through whom readers could learn. In the mid-1960s to the present day, conflicting accounts of Kim Il Sung's guerrilla activities diminished to be replaced with a singular historiography.

There were other biographies and literary works that had preceded the ones Kim Jong Il demanded from the April 15 LPU. The esteemed North

Korean writer and former KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federatio) member, Han Sorya wrote *Hyeollo* (Bloody Road) in 1946, which deemed Kim Il Sung a legendary hero during the anti-Japanese struggle. In 1953, Han wrote *Ryeoksa* (History), which was the first piece of longer fiction to deal with the guerrilla struggle of Kim Il Sung (Myers 1994, 105). Ri Na-yong's *Joseon minjok haebang tujaengsa* (History of the Struggle for the Liberation of the People of Korea, 1958), Rim Chun-chu's *Hangil mujang tujaeng sigi-reul hoesanghayeo* (Looking Back at the Time of the Anti-Japanese Struggle, 1960), and Pak Tal's *Joguk-eun saengmyeong bodado gwijunghada* (Fatherland Is more Precious than Life, 1960) were notable biographies of Kim Il Sung. On the 21st anniversary of the founding of the DPRK, on September 9, 1969, the Committee for Translation in Japan produced *Kim Il Sung, Biography I: From Birth to Triumphant Return to Homeland*, a translation from the original Korean edition by Baik Bong titled *Minjok-ui taeyang: Kim Il Sung janggun* (General Kim Il Sung: Sun of the Nation, 1968). This biography was over 577 pages in length and covered Kim Il Sung's "revolutionary family, early revolutionary struggles, fifteen-year-long arduous anti-Japanese armed struggle, to the subsequent liberation of the fatherland" (Baik 1969, 595).

Despite the length and coverage of Kim Il Sung's revolutionary life in Baik's biography, it was perhaps not what Kim Jong Il had in mind. He criticized Baik and other biographers for having fallen short of accentuating the essential creeds of the monolithic system and Juche ideology. Kim Jong Il recognized that leaving the task to the discretion of writers and biographers had resulted in disparate characterization of the leader. Therefore, Kim Jong Il suggested that "the task of depicting the leader should become an undertaking totally organized and planned by the Party" (Kim Jong Il 1967b, 236), which was his justification for creating his vanguard group of writers in order to silence other voices that might contradict, undermine, or misconstrue the revolutionary narrative of Kim Il Sung. For Kim Jong Il, institutionalizing a group of writers for his father's personality cult was the most urgent and important task in sustaining his father's political power and, subsequently, preparing for his succession.

In his speech, "Giving Wide Publicity to the Leader's Greatness," Kim

Jong Il explicated the invention of a “new system in its content and form,” discourse, style, and rhetoric that the writers needed to adopt in writing Kim Il Sung’s hagiography (Kim Jong Il 1965, 84). Kim Jong Il’s notion of a “new system” of writing was none other than the invention of a unified discourse on a Kim Il Sung, a reconfiguration or reinterpretation of the true historical account of the revolution. The new system was expected to reveal the “greatness of his revolutionary activities and his personality in great breadth and depth” (Kim Jong Il 1965, 84). The biography of Kim Il Sung under the new system was not to be a typical biography, but an invention of a saint or a knight in shining armor, or as South Korean scholar Shin Hyeong-gi expressed it, a “shape of a demigod (*sinin* 神人) that controls the mysteries of the universe” (Shin and O 2000, 23). The task of the writers was not simply to recount the revolutionary days of Kim Il Sung, but to create a fantastical narrative in the form of biographical fiction.

The personality cult of Kim Il Sung superseded the personality cults of both Mao and Stalin. Maurice Meisner, in *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism*, traced the historical development of Mao’s cult immediately after the Cultural Revolution, where it was “a patently manufactured product, deliberately contrived for immediate political ends” (Meisner 1982, 165); and Katerina Clark, in *The Soviet Novel*, analyzed the Stalinist myth of the Great Family through works like Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered*. However, these two scholars never mention an institutionalized group of writers delegated with the responsibility of producing the cult of Mao and Stalin as was the case with Kim Il Sung. The Kim cult would go well beyond Stalinism and Maoism in its pervasiveness, longevity, and extension beyond the individual to the family of the Great Leader (Armstrong 2003, 222). Therefore, rather than simply reproducing a biographical account of Kim’s life or inventing his so-called original philosophical treatises, the April 15 LPU was initiated with the purpose of novelizing the breadth of Kim Il Sung’s revolutionary exploits.

Kim Jong Il had already in mind the form and content of his father’s revolutionary narrative. The prescriptive form would have to be comprehensive to include every aspect of Kim Il Sung’s activities and systematic to properly allocate each of these aspects to the writers so that there was no

overlap between the novels. The content invariably had to consist of the leader's Juche ideology as the basis of every narrative, but it also had to include his human qualities, particularly his love for the people so that the readers would be compelled to place their faith in him.

Kim Jong Il recognized that in order to facilitate the efficiency of generating his father's personality cult through literature he needed to systematize and institutionalize a designated group of writers from the Writers Union so that he could closely monitor, correct, and insure the uniformity of the form and content of the novels (Kim Jong Il 1967b, 236). In his speech to the senior officials of the Propaganda and Agitation Department in 1967, he announced the formation of the April 15 LPU in honor of Kim Il Sung's birthday. The April 15 LPU was to become the true *engineer* of the Kim Il Sung legend, heralding a new revolutionary era in North Korea's literary history. However, the formative stages of creating this new group were hardly smooth and unproblematic.

The April 15 Literary Production Unit

Chon Se-bong (1915–1986) provided an account of how both Kim senior and Kim junior had each visited him to convince him to join and to urge his writers to produce the personality cult of Kim Il Sung (Chon 1994, 6). Chon was the chairman of the Writers Union at the time with a long and respectable track record. It was not until a third visit by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in 1966 that Chon was convinced to carry out the Great Leader's personality cult with the Writers Union (Kim Jong Il 1966, 116).

Kim senior and Kim junior's visit to Chon Se-bong was appropriate because Chon chaired the Writers Union at the time, and they needed the top official to comply with their demands. However, convincing Chon to take on the responsibility to develop the personality cult of Kim Il Sung was by no means an easy task for both Kims. Below is the North Korean scholar Kim Jong-ung's account of the incident:

In January of 1966, the Great Leader Kim Il Sung called another meet-

ing with Chon Se-bong and other veteran writers at a secluded resort and spent five to six hours a day for over seventeen days explaining his revolutionary plans and the real events that happened during the revolutionary struggle (Kim Jong-ung 1998, 74).

It is evident here that Kim Il Sung labored through many hours dictating his revolutionary exploits, and the writers labored through many hours listening to that history. It is highly inconclusive to think that Chon and the writers sat before the leader and accepted his retelling of history as unquestionable truth for five to six hours a day for over two weeks. This particular meeting was not a coercive persuasion nor a decree from Kim Il Sung for Chon to form a group of writers to create the personality cult. Instead, it reads as a collaborative process that required numerous days of educating the writers on the new historicity of the DPRK. Kim Jong Il also wrote of this incident:

[N]ever before had he [Kim Il Sung] spent so many hours in talking of the history of his revolutionary struggle, or gone into such detail on the anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle as he did this time. . . . When the leader was talking about the arduous march, you, comrade chairman of the Writers Union, were so strongly impressed that you asked him to show you his feet (Kim Jong Il 1966, 107, 113).

The legendary arduous march happened from November of 1938 to April of 1939, when the guerrilla fighters moved from South Paeja camp to North Daejeong camp during an unrelentingly cold winter. The legend has it that Kim Il Sung and his guerrilla force traveled on foot over snowy mountainous terrain for hundreds of miles with little rest, food, or shelter. The soldiers were physically tired and tested, but they persisted because of their faith in Kim Il Sung. This legend was dramatized in Sok Yun-gi's *Gonan-ui haenggun* (Arduous March, 1976), which was acclaimed as one of the most remarkable novels written by the April 15 LPU for the Immortal History series (Kim Jong-ung 1998, 81).

Kim Jong Il recalled how Chon had asked the Great Leader to reveal his calloused feet because he had been *impressed* by the account of the

arduous march. But this could also be read as Chon's skepticism. Chon Se-bong assumed that a trek of this magnitude would have left evident damage on Kim Il Sung's body. Chon wanted to make sure Kim's story was valid; and, if it took Kim Il Sung three visits to convince Chon, then it can be assumed Chon was *not* impressed with the leader's story.

Chon Se-bong may have felt that institutionalizing a separate group of writers solely for the production of Kim Il Sung's personality cult was inappropriate, conceptually problematic, and an endeavor that would further curtail the writers' creativity. Unfortunately, we will never know why Chon Se-bong initially refused but later complied with the Great Leader. But one thing is certain, Chon's acceptance motivated Kim Jong Il to systematize a new system of writing, reading, and thinking about his father as it was the first and necessary step toward the creation of the April 15 LPU.

The April 15 LPU functioned as an epistemological institution of generating and sustaining the legacy of Kim Il Sung. In his "On Establishing the April 15 Literary Production Unit" speech, Kim Jong Il said, "Generation after generation we must create outstanding revolutionary works of literature and art depicting the great stature of our revered leader in order to educate people to be revolutionary fighters unfailing in their loyalty to him" (Kim Jong Il 1967b, 237). The legend of Kim Il Sung needed to be bequeathed to the generations to come in written form rather than in oral tradition and in the form of a novel rather than in the form of a biography (Kim Jong Il 1992, 8). The novelization and the serialization of the legend were to be considered the greatest achievement of all other literary art forms in the DPRK. It was to be what the South Korean scholar Yu Im-ha (2009, 99) calls the "nation-narrative," where the nation would sing an epic narrative and a narrative that would sing of the glorious nation.

On the practical level, Kim Jong Il suggested that the Writers Union should choose well-qualified writers who had a comparatively long record of creative work and a wealth of creative experience, together with well-qualified writers of medium standing (Kim Jong Il 1967b, 239). Kim Jong Il may have had Sok Yun-gi, Chon Se-bong, and Kwon Jong-ung in mind for recruiting veteran writers. These three had long records of producing quality literary works according to the *Joseon jungang nyeongam* (Korean Cen-

tral Yearbook). Sok Yun-gi's *Jeonsadeul* (Warriors, 1960), Chon Se-bong's *Seokgaeul-ui sae bom* (New Spring in Seokgaeul, 1961), and Kwon Jong-ung's *Baegilhong* (Zinnia, 1961) were some of the representative literary works that the yearbook lauded.

The South Korean scholar Jeong Chang-hyeon suggests that the writers of the April 15 LPU used memoirs of the anti-Japanese struggle participants published in 1959 and 1960 along with autobiographies of Rim Chun-chu and Pak Tal as contextual materials on which to base Kim Il Sung's legacy (Jeong 2009, 45). According to Jeong, these memoirs and autobiographies were widely published for North Koreans to read, implying that the people were already aware of Kim Il Sung's revolutionary exploits and thus the inconsistent records. The task of the April 15 LPU was to consolidate all the references into a singularized national narrative. Kim Jong Il said, "Since the April 15 LPU is the first of its kind compared to other communist countries, the writers need to pool their collective wisdom in order to produce a couple of books as model works and acquire experience from the work" (Kim Jong Il 1967b, 239). Kim Jong Il also recognized the difficulty of producing a singular narrative when myriads of personal accounts and differing eyewitnesses existed.

In my recent visit to the DPRK, I interviewed Baek Nam-ryong, one of the authors of the April 15 LPU.¹ According to Baek, writers in the April 15 LPU choose a particular event from Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il's life to create a novel. The writers would research the event extensively in the library that is provided for them by the Party, and would receive feedback and criticisms from other writers of the April 15 LPU. Baek admitted that writing novels about the leaders is the most honorable task and so it requires time, patience, and considerable deliberation before beginning the endeavor.

1. I visited the DPRK from August 8 to August 15, 2015 for the sole purpose of interviewing Baek Nam-Ryong.

The Uphill and Endless Endeavor

Kim Jong Il envisioned the April 15 LPU but had not worked out the details of how each novel would be written. The only advice he offered his veteran writers was to receive inspiration from the Party: “Only under the monolithic guidance of the Party can the task of writing literary works representing the Great Leader be addressed energetically” (Kim Jong Il 1967b, 241–242). The notion of allowing the Party to be the writers’ muse, along with the countless anecdotes of how Kim Jong Il personally guided the writers to carry out this burdensome duty, does nothing more than displace the writers’ real hardships with the centrifugal force of the typical rhetoric that all North Korean writers must ostensibly articulate. After shedding away the layer upon layer of praise for Kim Jong Il for his infinite wisdom and sacrificial effort to his writers, we catch a glimpse of the writers’ struggles and compensation for their work.

In 1992, an anonymous writer wrote an article titled, “4.15 munhak changjakdan changnip” (Establishment of the April 15 Literary Production Unit), for the magazine *Joseon munhak* (Korean Literature) celebrating the 24th anniversary of the April 15 LPU’s formation. In this article, the author describes how the writers were incapable of resolving the problem of incorporating the monolithic system in their literary work.² This honest confession elucidates the pervasive problem among the writers in this group, which required them to sacrifice their creativity as artists by fixating on political demands. He then added that Kim Jong Il provided the writers with great wisdom and financial security to continue with this task.³ In other words, Kim Jong Il’s wisdom was juxtaposed with financial security as a way of accentuating what the anonymous writer believed to be equally important to him. Inasmuch as the writer valued Kim Jong Il’s advice on how to construct narratives of Kim Il Sung’s revolutionary exploits, he also confessed the importance of compensating the April 15 LPU writers with higher wages to motivate them to carry out this distinguished task.

2. *Joseon munhak* (Korean Literature), February 1992, 40.

3. *Joseon munhak* (Korean Literature), February 1992, 40.

Likewise, in another article in the same publication, author Kim Jong-nam recalled how the Dear General (Kim Jong Il) provided suitable living conditions and many awards for the writers to endure the hardships of inventing Kim Il Sung's mythology (Kim Jong-nam 2007, 25). The implication of writers joining the April 15 LPU is that it placed the writers in an elite position vis-à-vis the other writers in the Union, securing certain privileges such as higher wages, better food rations, and improved living conditions (J. Choe 2010, 143).

For example, Kim Jong Il so admired Choe Hak-su that 250,000 copies of his novel *Pyongyang sigan* (Pyongyang Time, 1977) were printed, whereas typical novels had runs of only 5,000-100,000 copies. According to an entry in North Korea's *Munhak daesajeon* (Literature Encyclopedia), *Pyongyang sigan* was published on December 13, 1977, with reprints on January 15, 1978 and April 13, 1978, and Kim Il Sung highly praised the novel for its excellence.⁴ When Choe Hak-su published *Baekdusan giseuk* (Foothills of Paektu Mountain) through the April 15 LPU in 1978, Kim Il Sung praised and thanked Choe for another excellent work, and Kim Jong Il also highly commended the work and showed much care.⁵ From that point on, Choe received the three most coveted recognitions from the nation's leaders: the Kim Il Sung Award, the highest literary award given to any writer in North Korea, was awarded in April 1982; he personally met Kim Il Sung in 1992 and 1993; and in 1997, he received a certificate of excellence from Kim Jong Il followed by a handsome gift for Choe's 60th birthday.⁶ It is unclear what this "handsome gift" was, but we can surmise that Choe Hak-su endured the famine and economic crisis of the 1990s with little concern for his own welfare.

In 2007, Choe Hak-su authored an essay titled, "Pyeongsaeng-eul maeumsok-e taeyang-ui yeongsang-eul mosigo" (Cherishing the Image of

4. *Joseon munhak yesul nyeongam* (Korean Literature and Arts Yearbook) (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Jonghap Chulpansa, 2000), 224.

5. *Joseon munhak yesul nyeongam* (Korean Literature and Arts Yearbook) (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Jonghap Chulpansa, 2000), 224.

6. *Joseon munhak yesul nyeongam* (Korean Literature and Arts Yearbook) (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Jonghap Chulpansa, 2000), 224.

the Sun in My Heart Forever), in which he thanked the father and son (Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il) for the generosity and unending love that had enabled him to become a writer to their liking. The title of the essay is indicative of Choe's obsequious testimony of the leaders' greatness, but further examination also provides insights into Choe's difficulties in writing these novels. Choe says that he resumed a piece that one writer had begun but could not complete it. Choe admits, "How was I supposed to complete this? No matter how hard I tried, nothing came to my mind" (H. Choe 2007, 27). Choe is given credit for writing *Baekdusan giseuk* (Foothills of Mount Paektu, 1978), which the Party claims to be the most vivid depiction of the personage of Kim Il Sung.⁷ Choe offers his eternal gratitude and loyalty to Kim Jong Il (as it is customary to do) for assisting him through the writing process. Yet *Foothills of Mount Paektu* was not Choe's project; it was passed onto him because the original writer, who had chosen to take on the task, could not complete it. Choe admits that he faced much difficulty in writing the novel not because he was asked to finish someone else's project but because of the pressure to correctly delineate the leader in the novel.

The April 15 LPU created a novel series titled "Immortal History" (Bulmyeol-ui ryeoksa) with *1932nyeon* (The Year 1932, 1972) as the first novel of the series. For the June 2007 issue of *Joseon munhak*, on the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the April 15 LPU, Kwon Jong-ung wrote about his experiences with the group in an article titled, "Chongseo 'bulmyeol-ui ryeoksa' jung jangpyeon soseol '1932nyeon'-i naogi kkaji" (Up to the Point of Publishing the Immortal History Series, Particularly *The Year 1932*). In it Kwon confesses:

One day in January of 1968, we began to write about the revolutionary work of the Great Leader for his 60th birthday celebration. . . . How were we to write this? We debated over and over, and in the end, we decided to ask Kim Jong Il for advice. After writing the plot of the novel, we showed it to him. . . . For me to write *The Year 1932*, I had to

7. *Joseon munhak yesul nyeongam* (Korean Literature and Arts Yearbook) (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Jonghap Chulpansa, 1979), 285.

do research and explore the history before I could commence. I completed the novel in the summer of 1971 and gave it to the Dear General. He came back to me and asked me to change the dialogue between the son [Kim Il Sung] and his mother [Kang Pan-sok] because this was to be the novel's central theme (Kwon 2007, 26).

Kwon Jong-ung was a prolific writer in North Korea, publishing short stories, novels, essays, and criticisms inside and outside of the April 15 LPU. He began his writing career in 1958 and continued producing works until 2004 with *Buk-euro ganeun gil* (Road Leading to the North, 2004). He received the Kim Il Sung Award in 1982, the same year Choe Hak-su received his award. He was a well-respected writer in the Writers Union, but when he was recruited to write for the April 15 LPU and produced *The Year 1932* (among others), his reputation escalated within the Writers Union.

Kwon's anecdote provides additional insight into the writing processes of members of the April 15 LPU. First, Kwon used the plural pronoun "we" to suggest that the initial stages of writing involved a collective effort rather than an individual undertaking, which Kim Jong Il advised writers to do. Second, Kwon had sought consultation and confirmation from Kim Jong Il (the Dear General) on numerous occasions, which alludes to either Kim Jong Il taking it upon himself to edit each novel produced by this group or Kwon reiterating the common rhetoric of stating that the wisdom of Kim Jong Il proved to be unfathomable. Since *The Year 1932* was the first of the series, Kim Jong Il most certainly would have examined the novel closely. Third, Kwon admitted that the task of writing a novelized version of Kim Il Sung's life proved to be difficult. *How are we to write this?* was the lingering question pervading the minds of each writer in the group. And fourth, the difficulty of this task is reflected by the amount of years it took to compose the first draft. Kwon and his colleagues were given this assignment in winter of 1968 and finished in summer of 1971, which means it took nearly three and a half years to draft the novel.

The writers had a deadline: April 15, 1972, the 60th anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth. The Korean culture celebrates one's 60th birthday as a sign of longevity and a prosperous life, and 1972 was to be a birthday cele-

bration of unparalleled magnitude. Kim Jong Il's gift to his father was to be the novelization of the revolutionary years, the monolithic system pressed and bound in material form. In Kwon's account, he expresses a sense of urgency as the deadline draws nearer, that the creation of Kim's cult was predicated on time and on a showcase of the institutionalization of the April 15 LPU. In 1972, *The Year 1932* was printed and distributed, and the Immortal History series was born.

The struggles Kwon Jong-ung faced in writing the novel must not be overlooked. Kwon's *The Year 1932* is 778 pages long. It was supposed to cover the events from March 1932 to February 1933. The Kim Il Sung biographer, Baik Bong, also wrote about this time period, but covered it in eight or so pages. Kwon's article revealed the difficulty of having to extend a small slice of the leader's revolutionary history covered in about eight pages to a novel of 778 pages. It goes without saying that Kwon may have had to wrestle with his co-writers to come up with dramatic plots within the larger plot of the novel to create a literary work of this magnitude.

The Year 1932 set a precedent for other novels in the Immortal History series to follow. Most of the other novels in the series also range anywhere from 500 to 800 pages and cover events that took place in several years or within a year. Each novel highlights a single historical event as the overarching theme. The task of the April 15 LPU writers is to include characters, subplots, and dramatic tension to bring a mundane event to life.

Immortal History Series: *The Year 1932*

The Immortal History series is not written in chronological order. The first novel, *The Year 1932*, begins twenty years after the birth of Kim Il Sung. Chronologically, the series should begin with Kim Jong's *Dat-eun ollatta* (Anchor is Drawn, 1982), which focuses on Kim Il Sung's student activism years between 1925 and 1926. However, this work did not appear until 1982. Shortly after the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, the Immortal History series should have ended with Paek Po-hum and Song Sang-won's *Yeong-saeng* (Eternal Life, 1997), which immortalizes Kim Il Sung's reign over

North Korea and implies the advancement toward nuclear missile testing. Instead, ten more novels were published to fill in the missing events in Kim Il Sung's life.

The end result of each novel in the Immortal History series must project five conditions: first, the early biographies of Kim Il Sung that were left to the discretion of writers needed to be consolidated by the April 15 LPU (Kim Jong Il 1992, 31); second, the April 15 LPU underwent the task of inventing the revolutionary history of Kim Il Sung during his anti-Japanese struggles (E. Kim 2006, 151); third, the delineation of Kim Il Sung needed to elevate him above the people and even above the past heroes of Korean history, such as General Yi Sun-sin; fourth, the series unquestionably needed to emphasize Kim's Juche ideology coupled with the monolithic system in order to accentuate *our style of socialism* (E. Kim 2006, 148); and fifth, the series needed to be written and read as masterpieces of North Korean literature.

Table 1. List of Novels in the Immortal History Series

Novel	Author	Historical Period	Historical Incident	Year of Publication
<i>The Year 1932</i> (1932년)	Kwon Jong-ung	1932–1933	First clash with Japanese soldiers and retreat to Southern Manchuria	1972
<i>Dawn of Revolution</i> (혁명의 려명)	Chon Se-bong	1927–1928	Kim Il Sung's student activism at Jilin	1973
<i>Arduous March</i> (고난의 행군)	Sok Yun-gi	1938–1939	About a hundred-day arduous march from South Paeja to North Daejeong	1976
<i>Foothills of Mount Paektu</i> (백두산 기슭)	Choe Hak-su / Hyon Sung-gol	1936	Formation of the "Liberation of the Fatherland Group" on May 5, 1936 and stationing at the foot of Paekdusan mountain	1978

<i>Tumen River District</i> (두만강 지구)	Sok Yun-gi	1939	Planning the military strategy for the Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Army	1980
<i>Severe Battlefield</i> (준엄한 전구)	Kim Byong-hun	1939-1940	Retreat from the northeast part of Paekdusan mountain	1981
<i>Spring at the Base Camp</i> (근거지의 봄)	Ri Jong-ryol	1933-1934	Establishment and securing of the Righteous Base camp	1981
<i>The Great Land is Verdant</i> (대지는 푸르다)	Sok Yun-gi	1930-1931	Restoration of the fractured groups and revolutionizing the farms	1981
<i>Anchor is Drawn</i> (닻은 올랐다)	Kim Jong	1925-1926	Organization of the "Overthrowing of Imperialism Union" at Hwasong Uisuk	1982
<i>Milky Way Galaxy</i> (은하수)	Chon Se-bong	1929-1930	Kim presenting his Juche ideology at the Karyun meeting on June 30, 1930	1982
<i>Amnok River</i> (압록강)	Choe Hak-su	1936-1937	Triumphant encounter with the Japanese army	1983
<i>Unforgettable Winter</i> (잊지 못할 겨울)	Jin Jae-hwan	1937-1938	Arming and training the Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Army in Miryeong	1984
<i>Spring Thunder</i> (봄우뢰)	Sok Yun-gi	1931-1932	Establishment of the Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Army	1985
<i>Noble Love</i> (위대한 사랑)	Choe Chang-hak	1937	Raising youths to carry out the revolution in Miryeong during the Sino-Japanese War	1987
<i>Bloody Road</i> (혈료)	Pak Yu-hak	1934-1936	Marching from South to North Manchuria and a meeting at Nahu Dao	1988

<i>Radiant Morning</i> (빛나는 아침)	Kwon Jong-ung	1945-1946	Dealing with the intelligentsia and establishing Kim Il Sung University	1988
<i>Summer of 1950</i> (50년 여름)	An Tong-chun	1950	Outbreak of the Liberation of the Fatherland (Korean War)	1990
<i>Spring of Korea</i> (조선의 봄)	Chon Se-bong	1945-1946	Successfully organizing land reform from March 5-8, 1946	1991
<i>Power of Korea</i> (조선의 힘)	Jong Ki-jong	1950-1951	Temporary strategic retreat	1992
<i>Victory</i> (승리)	Kim Su-gyong	1952-1953	Meeting at Panmunjeom and signing of the armistice on July 27, 1953	1994
<i>Eternal Life</i> (영생)	Paek Po-hum / Song Sang-won	1994	Kim Il Sung's death and the nuclear missile crisis	1997
<i>Legend of the Great Land</i> (대지의 전설)	Kim Sam-bok	1953-1958	Collectivization of all farmlands	1998
<i>Beautiful Land of Korea</i> (삼천리 강산)	Kim Su-gyong	1947-1948	Establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on September 9, 1948	2000
<i>Military Parade Square</i> (열방광장)	Jong Ki-jong	1945-1948	Establishment of the Korean People's Army on February 8, 1948	2001
<i>Road to Prosperity</i> (번영의 길)	Pak Ryong-un	1953-1956	Reconstruction period according to the Juche policy	2001
<i>Reform</i> (개선)	Choe Hak-su	1945	Establishing and reforming the Party on October 10, 1945	2002

<i>Verdurous Mountains</i> (푸른 산악)	An Tong-chun	1951	Battles on Height 1211	2002
<i>Song of Man</i> (인간의 노래)	Kim Sam-bok	1956-1960	Chollima Movement and economic recovery	2003
<i>Anthem of the Sun</i> (태양찬가)	Nam Tae-hyon	1948-1955	Establishment of the Korean Residents in Japan Council on May 25, 1955	2005
<i>Morning on the Front Line</i> (전선의 아침)	Pak Yun	1952	Battle with U.S. forces on the southern tip of Korea	2005
<i>Plains of Chongsan</i> (청산벌)	Kim Sam-bok	1959-1960	Announcement of Chongsanni thought and methodology	2007
<i>Prelude to Spring</i> (봄의 서곡)	Baek Nam-ryong	1994	Kim Jong Il encouraging the people to endure the Arduous March	2008
<i>Daebak Mountain Ridge</i> (대박산마루)	Song Sang-won		Kim Il Sung visiting the historical site of Dangun	2009
<i>Future</i> (미래)	Choe Yong-jo		Kim Il Sung building Mangyongdae schools	2011
<i>Fate</i> (운명)	Jong Ki-jong	1945	Memories of Kim's achievements	2012
<i>Eve of Liberation</i> (해방전야)	Jon Hong-sik	1943	Events during the meeting in Manchuria	2012
<i>New Nation</i> (새나라)	Yun Kyong-chan		Reconstruction of the Botonggang river	2013
<i>Survival</i> (명맥)	Thak Suk-bon	1945-1948	Building weapons for the Korean War	2013
<i>The Land of Loyalty</i> (의리의 전역)	Yun Jong-gil	1950-1953	Honoring the Chinese soldiers who fought in the Korean War	2014

Source: Translated from Nam Won-jin's table and from my own research.

Indeed, the Immortal History series is undoubtedly a comprehensive collection of a single personage. According to South Korean scholars Shin Hyeong-gi and O Seong-ho (2000), the series was not to neglect even the slightest moment in Kim Il Sung's life, and, therefore, the series was to be North Korea's greatest literary achievement in constructing the heroism of its leader. The North Korean literary critic Yun Gi-dok says that no one author could ever write the entirety of Kim Il Sung's life with such breadth and depth, and that the project of immortalizing the Great Leader will be an endless endeavor (Yun 1991, 19). Yun Gi-dok has the astute premonition that the Immortal History series and the Immortal Leadership series will continue, adding more novels to the illustrious collection. The novelization of Kim Il Sung is seen as a canonization project of decorating the shelves for the purposes of showcasing the magnitude of the writers' literary greatness. Yun Gi-dok's statement is doubly important because of the implication that the April 15 LPU will have to generate more narratives of *a* Kim Il Sung, of *a* Kim Jong Il, and now of *a* Kim Jong Un as an endless, perpetual, and even burdensome endeavor for as long as such an institutionalized group of writers exists and for as long as there is a monarchical leadership in power in North Korea.

Conclusion

Readers outside of the DPRK often dismiss North Korean writers for producing only works serving the personality cult of Kim Il Sung. They consider the writers to be automatons of the state, mechanically reciting Kim Il Sung's legendary history without questioning or subverting it. In fact, it is widely understood that any such dissent by the writers would be punishable by banishment or even death. It appears as if the state has complete control over its writers, and the writers are products of state oppression.

The April 15 LPU is certainly a group that was formed and controlled by the state. Each writer is given the task of writing an episode of Kim Il Sung's revolutionary history. The narrative of each novel is confined to one episode; therefore, the writers cannot deviate from the episode by using

their creative measures, but rather accentuate and dramatize the episode with their creativity. For outside readers, this appears as the writers' acceptance and willingness to support the Kim mythology. But this is an oversight of the complex and problematic literary culture in North Korea.

When the writers of the April 15 LPU hyperbolize and sentimentalize Kim Il Sung's revolutionary feats in their novels, it is not because they have purchased the particular episode wholesale, but rather because it presents an opportunity for them to showcase their artistry in writing. The Immortal History series ostensibly places Kim Il Sung at the center of the narratives as they are undoubtedly about the exploits of the Great Leader. However, from a different perspective, these novels are demonstrations of the writers' laborious efforts to prove their worthiness as devoted Kim Il Sung-ists.

The task of the April 15 LPU was not only to recreate, retell, or reinvent the true history of Kim Il Sung's revolutionary activities, but to personify the Juche ideology into a living, organic being with a name attributed to it: Kim Il Sung. Thus, the greatest problem the writers faced in undertaking this task was not only hyperbolizing the myth of Kim Il Sung but breathing life into a political system and into an incomprehensible ideology with which they were not quite familiar. In short, the difficulty of writing such a narrative is not how the Juche ideology burgeoned from Kim Il Sung but how Kim Il Sung is Juche incarnate—how the ideology became flesh. It is the *becoming of flesh* that needed to be written in the multi-volume series; it is this becoming that systematized Kim's full-scale personality cult; and it is this systematized cult that put the writers of the April 15 LPU under much pressure and presented them with great difficulties.

To this day, the April 15 LPU has yet to publish novels on the revolutionary exploits of Kim Jong Un. The greatest problem the LPU writers now face is Kim Jong Un's birthplace and his revolutionary qualifications. Contriving a nationalistic narrative of Kim Jong Un will prove to be difficult for the April 15 LPU writers, particularly when it is no secret to North Koreans that their current leader was born, raised, and educated outside of the DPRK. Unlike Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un entered the political scene with no evident experience either observing or assisting his father run the

country. As a result of his death in December of 2011, Kim Jong Il bequeathed the nation to his son with little time to adjust him to the leadership position, and thus failing to establish the groundwork for Kim Jong Un's cult of personality. It will be interesting to observe how the April 15 LPU struggles to construct Kim Jong Un's nationalistic and mythical exploits in the days to come.

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