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## BOOK REVIEW

**Ra Jong-yil. *The Rise and Sudden Fall of JANG SONG-THAEK*,  
Albany: Suny Press, 2019, 200 pages. ISBN: 978-143847372-7**

Since Kim Jong Il passed away in December 2011, concerns about the stability of the North Korean leadership have been numerous, but so far the smooth continuation of political and economic affairs has been a key priority. The North Korea-watching community has therefore been taken aback by the rumoured removal of Jang Song-thaek, a figure with deep connections to the Kim family and involvement in maintaining administrative and economic matters. Two years after Jang Song-thaek was removed as Vice Chairman of the National Defence Commission in November 2013 and, according to North Korean media, executed in December 2013 after a quick military trial. The personality of Jang Song-thaek, including his drinking habits, was never deeply analysed in the Western literature and the publication of Ra Jong-yil can be considered a pioneer here. The author also provides some insights related to intrigues, politics and relationships within the Kim family, including the thesis that Kim Jong-il was not interested in his own succession (p. 139).

The author is Ra Jong-yil, born in 1940, a former South Korean ambassador who has authored books on politics concerning North Korea. After studying Political Science at Seoul University he obtained a PhD. in Political Science at the University of Cambridge. After the election of President Kim Dae-jung in 1997, he joined the Presidential Transition Committee and became the Executive Director of the Presidential Transition Committee. In March 1998 he became the first deputy head of the National Safety Planning Department and second vice president. In 1999 he was appointed the first chief of the NIS. Meanwhile he became a professor of political science at the University of Kyunghee in 1999. He served as ambassador to the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the United Kingdom between 2001 and 2003. Between 2004 and 2007, he served as the ambassador of the Republic of Korea to Japan. Since 2016, he has been a professor at the University of Gachon and since 2019.

The book *The Rise and Sudden Fall of JANG SONG-THAEK*, written by Ra Jong-yil was published by Suny Press in 2019. Excluding the preface, notes, bibliography in English and Korean, and the Index, the book consists of a classic structure: eight chapters presenting the life of Jang Song-Thaek in chronological order.

Chapter one is on state power and Kim Jong-il's youth. The author looks also at selected moments of the history of the DPRK, such as the famine of the 1990s (p. 6), but also frivolous events such as Kim's dinner parties (p. 9). The author also claims that Kim Jong-il said there wouldn't be a repeat of the father-to-son succession (p. 20).

Chapter two describes the early life of Jang Song-thaek including his academic life at Kim Il-sung University and Wonsan University of Economics (p. 25–40).

Chapter three discusses, from one side the relationship between Jang Song-thaek and Kim Kyung-hee, and from the other, the main and side branches of the Kim family. Later the chapter continues with a description of the life of the previously mentioned couple in Moscow, where they studied (pp. 48–49), including their culinary (p. 50) and cultural habits (p. 51).

Chapter four focuses on the first year after their wedding in 1972. The author posits the thesis that his wife Kim Kyong-hui was more important than Jang Song-thaek (p. 62) in the North Korean leadership as she was a princess and Jang only a princess's husband (p. 62). This chapter also contends with the idea that Kim Kyong-hee was the number two in North Korea, insisting that in the 2000s Jang Song-thaek reached the position of number two under Kim Jong-il (p. 95) but was an outsider with no blood connection to the Kim family (p. 107). The next chapter entitled "The Dark Side of Success" explains the various construction projects managed by Jang Song-thaek (p. 79) including preparations for the 1989 World Festival of Youth. This project was the most rewarding for Jang Song-thaek, as described in chapter six (p. 91). Later we learn that Jang Song-thaek was interested in the North Korean nuclear programme but more so in reforming his country, especially social infrastructure and the energy industry (p. 148 and 151).

Chapter six explains also the relation between Kim Jong-il and Song Hye-rim, his second wife (pp. 99–100). This chapter also emphasises the negative opinion of Jang Song-thaek on the economic policy of his country: "The fatherland is in an abominable state right now. People are dying of hunger by the tens and thousands!" (p. 103).

Chapter seven discussed the role of Jang Song-thaek in the development of the economy, mentioning his visits to South Korea in October 2002 (p. 119) and his revolutionising episodes (p. 126). This chapter provides also glimpses into the life of Jang Kum-song, the only child of Jang Song-thaek (p. 129).

Chapter eight focuses on the death of Jang Song-thaek. The author notes that Jang Song-thaek was responsible for Security Organisations (p. 147) and the atrocities committed against his men, such as “the bodies of Jang’s men were torn to pieces” (p. 165) and purges after Jang’s death (p. 167).

The relationship between Jang Song-thaek and Kim Jong-il reminds me of the relation between Kim Jong-il and his step-mother, Kim Song-ae. Kim Jong-il accepted her in the 1970s until she was considered in some quarters as more important than her husband Kim Il-sung. When this happened in the mid-1970s, Kim Jong-il’s was very angry. A similar thing happened in the framework of the relations with Jang Song-thaek. On page 124, Social Security Department agents are said to have relied more on the power of Jang Song-thaek than Kim Jong-il, adding to Kim Jong-il’s infuriation. He forced Jang Song-thaek to come back from a trip to Europe and put him under house arrest (p. 125). The constant anxiety of Kim Jong-il combined to the forced administration of Jang due to his skills forced Kim Jong-il to accept, tolerate, but control the person of Jang Song-thaek. The fact that Jang regularly visited non-communist European countries, a dream never fulfilled by Kim Jong-il, was also a driver for the ambiguous relation ship between both leaders.

From a different perspective, several elements demonstrate the limitations of this book. On page 114 we read that “Nearly all of the executed were secretaries, including Choe Ryong-hae”, who as of 2019, was still alive. Also on page 168, there is a list of officials executed for the same list of crimes as Jang Song-thaek such as Jang Song-thaek’s brother-in-law and ambassador to Cuba Jon Yong-jin, Jang Song-thaek’s nephew an ambassador to Malaysia Jang Yong-chol. From my perspective, I have heard from several sources that these people were not executed but put under house arrest in North Korea. Unfortunately, it’s impossible to tell where the truth is.

Another weak point of this publication is the troubled image painted of Kim Song-ae’s family, which excludes their relationship with Kim Jong-il, after being theoretically removed from the top North Korean leadership. The fictional aspect of the book is confirmed by the author who acknowledged that he reconstructed some situations (p. xviii of the introduction), which may provide a subjective view of the North Korean leadership. The reader is also misled as he does not always clearly now where reality finishes and fiction starts.

Still, for such a concentrated work -- a little under two hundred pages -- this book covers a good deal of ground related to the history of Jang Song-thaek. As a kind of precursor (only a handful of books related to the North Korean leadership have been published in western languages), its content provides an original approach to the network of Kim Jong-il and the leaders of the North Korean economy. The book also defends the thesis that only close people to Kim Jong-il were allowed to travel all over the world. His cook, Kenji Fujimoto, went to countries such as Germany and the Czech Republic in order to satisfy the needs of his boss. Regarding Jang Song-thaek, he went several times to Europe, including long trips to northern Europe, in order to find new business partners for North Korea, but also discovering red districts such as Pigalle in Paris (p. 103).

In spite of the previously mentioned remarks, I definitely consider this book to be an important contribution to the field of North Korean studies. I may suggest the author make a second edition by correcting mistakes and providing more data values regarding the impact of Jang Song-thaek on the North Korean economy. I highly praise the author for this book. I definitely recommend it as a key source to better acquaint oneself with the North Korean leadership.

Nicolas Levi

