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Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Adolescent Heir: Developmental and Institutional Risks in the Fourth Generation Transition

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Abstract

DPRK's leadership succession represents one of the world's most enduring and institutionalized hereditary systems in a modern authoritarian state. The Kim family has maintained power since 1948 through a carefully constructed ideological framework that combines Juche ideology, the Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Ideological System, the theory of continuous revolution, the leader's successor theory, and the sacred Paektu bloodline doctrine. This article first examines the theoretical foundations and historical operation of the three-generation succession model, from Kim Il-Sung to Kim Jong-Il and then to Kim Jong-Un. Highlighting how bloodline legitimacy, public grooming, and elite manipulation have ensured remarkably stable transfers of power. It then turns to the emerging fourth-generation transition, focusing on Kim Jong-Un's daughter Kim Ju-Ae. Drawing on developmental psychology theories from Piaget's cognitive development theory and Erikson's psychosocial stages, the analysis critiques the structural mismatches inherent in accelerating a young adolescent into the role of supreme leader. To contextualize these challenges, this paper compares Kim Ju-Ae's situation with prominent female leaders in East Asia and South Asia, namely Park Geun-hye (South Korea, ascended at 61 with extensive political experience as First Lady and party chairperson), Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh, first term at 48 after years of exile and party leadership), and Aung San Suu Kyi (Myanmar, de facto leader at 70 following decades of dissident activism). These women typically assumed power in mid-to-late adulthood, with established careers, networks, elite educations, and achievements, often bolstered by dynastic ties to former leaders; for example, Aung San Suu Kyi's father, General Aung San, is the Father of Myanmar; Sheikh Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is the first president of Bangladesh. These characteristics allow them to overcome patriarchal bar-

riers through maturity and independent legitimacy. In contrast, Kim Ju-Ae's early exposure lacks such life experience, education, professional accomplishments, or autonomous coalitions, amplifying risks in cognitive maturity, elite obedience, and cultural acceptance within DPRK's rigid system. This paper argues that while the hereditary model is theoretically adaptable, Kim Ju-Ae's candidacy exposes unprecedented risks in cognitive readiness, elite consolidation, patriarchal cultural barriers, and long-term dynastic legitimacy. These challenges may render the fourth succession the most unstable in the history of DPRK, with significant implications for regime stability and Northeast Asian security.

Keywords

DPRK, Kim Ju-Ae, Kim Jong-Un, Development Psychology, Hereditary Leadership, Dynastic Succession, Political Psychology

1. Introduction

Ever since its founding in 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has operated under a highly institutionalized family-based hereditary leadership model. According to Lim (2012), the Kim family's legitimacy doesn't come from constitutional rules or elections; it rests on a carefully constructed ideological myth centered on the "Paektu bloodline" (백두혈통). This bloodline is presented as the sacred continuation of Kim Il-Sung's anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle and the pure essence of the Korean revolution itself.

The theoretical structure that supports this succession system is built from several interlocking doctrines. First, there is Juche ideology (주체사상), which Kim Il-Sung developed and formalized from the 1950s through the 1970s. It stresses the Korean people's self-reliance, but at the same time, it places the "Great Leader" at the center—as the indispensable brain and heart of the masses.

On the other hand, the Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Ideological System, adopted in 1974 and revised several times since. These principles effectively serve as the country's highest guiding law. Principle 10 is particularly direct: it declares that "the party and revolutionary destiny must be forever continued through the Paektu bloodline," which essentially turns hereditary succession into something sacred.

Alongside these, two specific succession theories emerged in the 1970s to justify Kim Jong-Il's rise: the Theory of Continuous Revolution and the Leader's Successor Theory. The first one argues that the socialist revolution cannot be finished in a single generation—it has to be handed down indefinitely until true communism is achieved. The second lays out the necessary qualities for a successor: unlimited loyalty to the Great Leader, exceptional ideological leadership, and exemplary communist virtues. In reality, only a direct blood descendant can be seen as fully possessing these qualities.

These ideas were later refined into the Theory of Revolutionary Succession and

the concept of Generational Transfer, both of which stress that power has to pass to the next biological generation—not to siblings or collateral relatives—so the bloodline's purity can be preserved.

Taken together, these doctrines manage to reframe what might otherwise look like feudal-style hereditary rule as a "revolutionary" and "scientific" process. Public appearances, party congress ratifications, and elite management aren't just ceremonies; they are practical mechanisms for putting the ideology into action. In DPRK's extremely opaque political system, these carefully staged public events, such as military parades, missile launches, factory visits, and diplomatic occasions, have become one of the few windows outsiders have into the power-transfer process. The timing, frequency, locations, and even small ceremonial details are all used to signal regime stability and continuity.

2. Analytical Method

This paper is a conceptual comparative analysis that draws upon developmental psychology, elite management theory in authoritarian contexts, and comparative political psychology. Following Gerring (2007), it adopts a single-case study approach with comparative elements to assess the institutional and developmental risks associated with DPRK's emerging fourth-generation leadership transition. Given the notorious opacity of the DPRK regime and the pervasive uncertainty surrounding information flows within and about the DPRK—stemming from restricted direct access, controlled propaganda dissemination, and the inherent challenges of verifying claims in a highly closed system—this study deliberately prioritizes sources of demonstrably higher reliability. The analysis relies on a synthesis of publicly available materials, with particular emphasis on primary sources such as official DPRK state media reports and photographs disseminated via the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), and secondary sources including assessments issued by the Republic of Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), peer-reviewed academic literature on DPRK succession and authoritarian elite dynamics, and credible international news reporting that has been cross-verified across multiple independent outlets. Materials were selected and weighed according to the following criteria: 1) temporal proximity and direct relevance to observable grooming events or leadership health indicators; 2) cross-verifiability from at least two independent sources whenever possible, to mitigate risks of misinformation or unconfirmed speculation; and 3) institutional credibility and evidentiary value (state media weighted for its symbolic signaling and propaganda intent as a direct regime voice; intelligence assessments for their insider evaluations based on specialized collection methods; and academic studies for rigorous theoretical contextualization).

3. The Succession Process of the First Three Generations

As Oh (1988) documented in her early study of the first hereditary transition, Kim Il-Sung started preparing his eldest son, Kim Jong-Il, back in the early 1970s. He

put him in charge of the Propaganda and Agitation Department and carefully built a personality cult around his own revolutionary past—stories that Kim Jong-Il then helped shape and spread. Over nearly twenty years, Kim Jong-Il steadily accumulated real institutional power inside the party. The decisive moment came at the Sixth Congress of the Workers' Party in 1980, when he was publicly named successor, the first time anything like that had ever been announced so openly in DPRK history. After that, the two were seen together constantly: inspecting factories, visiting military units, and attending mass rallies. Those joint appearances weren't just photo ops; they were meant to cement the father-son link in the public mind and show everyone that the transition was smooth and inevitable.

Kim Jong-Il's own succession planning turned out to be far more rushed and dramatic. At first, his eldest son, Kim Jong-Nam, seemed like a possible heir, but that ended abruptly after the embarrassing 2001 fake-passport incident at Narita Airport (Watts & Gittings, 2001). After that, Kim Jong-Il shifted attention to his third son, Kim Jong-Un. By then, his own health was already failing, especially after the stroke in 2008, which explains why everything had to move much faster. Kim Jong-Un made his first public appearance in 2010 at a military parade and was quickly given high-ranking party positions (Bristow, 2010). When Kim Jong-Il died unexpectedly in December 2011, Kim Jong-Un stepped in after only about two years of visible grooming—nothing like the almost two decades his father had been given. Choosing the youngest son and sidelining the older brothers made one thing very clear: the regime was applying its "generational transfer" principle pragmatically. Bloodline purity and the leadership qualities the regime thought it saw in Kim Jong-Un mattered far more than age or seniority (Branigan, 2010; Bechtol, 2013; Horan, 2025).

In the end, both transitions worked because the ideological doctrines gave them sacred legitimacy, the long or short periods of public grooming created recognition among both ordinary people and elites, and careful elite management by promotions for loyalists, purges for potential threats, to remove serious opposition. The outcome was two surprisingly peaceful hereditary handovers inside what is otherwise one of the most totalitarian systems on earth (see also Kim, 2015). That kind of stability is actually quite rare in the history of authoritarian regimes.

4. Kim Ju-Ae's Emergence as the Potential Fourth Generation Successor

By the time Kim Jong-Un came to power, the spotlight had already started shifting toward his daughter, Kim Ju-Ae, who was possibly born around 2013 (Madden, 2023). Her very first public appearance came in late 2022, when she was spotted at an intercontinental ballistic missile launch (Lendon, 2022; Smith, 2022) as shown in **Figure 1**. State media didn't name her at first, but she was dressed formally, standing right beside her father in a prominent spot, and from then on, her visibility increased dramatically. That alone was enough to set off widespread speculation.

Through 2025, she kept showing up at more and more events. Figure 2 depicts a high-profile trip to Beijing, which became her first trip abroad by train. Other events include factory openings, several missile tests, economic site visits, and New Year's ceremonies. Then, in early 2026, she went with her parents to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun mausoleum, given a visit that carries heavy symbolic weight and is almost always reserved for someone being positioned as the next in line. In February 2026, the Republic of Korea's National Intelligence Service publicly assessed that the regime had entered the designated successor phase (Cho, 2026, as cited in Lee Seong-kweun). This phase can be interpreted as the deliberate stage in which the heir is systematically associated with high-profile symbolic activities (missile tests, military parades, commemorative visits and more) and institutional roles so as to signal continuity and inevitability to domestic elites and the international community (Cho, 2026, as cited in Lee Seong-kweun). Kim Ju-Ae has since been assigned responsibilities within the Missile Administration and has appeared at post-9th Party Congress military events, including shooting drills.

Figure 1. Kim Ju-Ae first appeared in public alongside her father during the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile in 2022 (Source: KCNA).

Figure 2. Kim Ju-Ae made her first trip abroad to China by train (Source: CCTV).

This rush to advance her so quickly may be linked to ongoing concerns about Kim Jong-Un's health. Based on earlier NIS assessments, Kim Jong-Un's weight is around 140 kg, he has hypertension and diabetes, there's a family history of heart disease, and he smokes and drinks heavily (Shim, 2023; Choi, 2023). Officials have reportedly been looking abroad for medicines to manage his obesity-related conditions. This observed urgency may aligns with Post & Robins' (1993) "captive king" syndrome, in which closed regimes without clear succession rules accelerate heir grooming to avoid leadership paralysis when the supreme leader's health falters. These developments suggest that the push to have a visible fourth-generation heir isn't just ideological but deeply pragmatic. The regime may clearly feel that time may be shorter than it would like.

5. Developmental Psychology Critique: Piaget and Erikson Frameworks

The hereditary model has worked surprisingly well across three generations. Even so, applying the hereditary model to an adolescent female successor reveals significant structural problems, especially when viewed through the lens of developmental psychology.

According to the theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1971; McLeod, 2025). The theory breaks thinking down into four stages, and the one that matters here is the "formal operational stage," which usually starts kicking in around 11 - 12 years old and keeps maturing through late adolescence. That's when people become capable of abstract thinking, hypothetical-deductive reasoning, systematic problem-solving, and handling complex "if-then" logic with multiple variables. Before that, in the "concrete operational stage," kids (and early teens) mostly rely on tangible things they can see and touch, as well as direct experience. In a more general fashion, if you suddenly put someone who hasn't really solidified that formal stage into a role that demands long-term strategic planning, multi-layered decision-making, and extremely abstract judgment, it's like running a nuclear-armed state, and you're asking for trouble, including cognitive overload, biased reasoning, shaky decisions, and similar issues.

Then there is Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which puts the fifth stage, "identity versus role confusion", right in the middle of adolescence (**Table 1**), roughly ages 12 to 18. The big task here is figuring out who you are: exploring different values, social roles, life paths, and building a stable sense of self. Moreover, when the outside world forces a fixed, ultra-high-pressure identity on you too early. It is like being the absolute supreme leader of a totalitarian regime—it short-circuits that whole exploratory process. You can end up with role confusion, identity crisis, inner conflict, and long-term struggles with emotional regulation or self-doubt. Basically, identity gets crystallized prematurely, which not only messes with mental health but also leaves you without the psychological flexibility and resilience you need for sustained high-stakes leadership (Erikson, 1950; Rageliene, 2016).

These two classic frameworks, Piaget on cognitive readiness and Erikson on

identity formation, work especially well for analyzing hereditary succession in a closed system like DPRK's, because they speak directly to the kind of extreme pressure a young leader would face. As Post (2004) explains:

> "The young adult transition is of particular importance to the field of political psychology, for it is during this youthful transition that psychological identification consolidates, including political identification" (p. 21).

Yet we must remain cautious. Everything we see of Kim Ju-Ae comes from carefully staged KCNA photographs and intelligence summaries, such as missile tests, parades and mausoleum visits. None of that reveals her private thinking, emotional state or actual reasoning under pressure. Developmental stages are never fixed or uniform, and in an environment of constant propaganda and performance demands, normal growth patterns can be accelerated or twisted in ways we simply cannot measure from the outside. The following analysis offers a theoretically grounded assessment rather than a clinical judgment of the structural mismatch between her current stage of development and the impossible demands the regime is placing on her.

Table 1. Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (Source: NCBI).

Period	Stage (Syntonic vs Dystonic Tendency)	Virtue (Ego Strength Gained from Navigation of Positive and Negative Qualities)	Malignancy (Dystonic Pathology)	Example of Navigating the Stage
Infancy	(I) Trust vs Mistrust*	Hope	Withdrawal	Secure environment provided by the caregiver, with regular access to affection and food
Early Childhood	(II) Autonomy vs Shame, Doubt**	Will	Compulsion	Caregiver promotes self sufficiency while maintaining a secure environment
Play Age	(III) Initiative vs Guilt***	Purpose	Inhibition	Caregiver encourages, supports. and guides the child's own initiatives and interests
School Age	(IV) Industry vs Inferiority****	Competence	Inertia (passivity)	Reasonable expectations set in school and at home, with praise for their accomplishments
Adolescence	(V) Identity vs Identity Confusion	Fidelity	Repudiation	An individual weighs their previous experiences, societal expectations, and aspirations to establish values and "find themselves"
Young Adulthood	(VI) Intimacy vs Isolation	Love	Exclusion	Individuals form close friendships or long-term partnerships
Adulthood	(VII) Generativity vs Stagnation/ Self-absorption	Care	Rejectivity	Engagement with the next generation through parenting coaching, orteaching
Old Age	(VIII) Integrity vs Despair	Wisdom	Disdain	Contemplation and acknowledgment of personal life accomplishments

Concomitant Freudian stages: *Oral stage, **Anal stage, ***Genital stage, ****Latency stage.

Kim Ju-Ae, who's possibly about 13 - 14 in 2026, is sitting exactly at that awk-

ward transition point between these two stages. And yet she's already been pushed onto an extreme public stage where she has to project abstract decisiveness, strategic vision, and unquestionable authority, whether it is standing at missile tests or military parades. Her ability to think in truly abstract terms and her sense of self are still developing, nowhere near mature enough for what the DPRK supreme leadership actually requires. That mismatch between where she is developmentally and what's being demanded of her is structural, not accidental.

6. Elite Management Theory and Power Consolidation Risks

Goldring & Ward (2024, 2025) elucidate the relevant risks through their elite management theory, which describes the pre-succession strategy whereby an incumbent leader deliberately introduces "outsiders"—typically younger technocrats or cadres lacking deep ties to the old military-confidant network—into the inner circle. Such promotions create a cohort whose political survival becomes directly contingent upon the designated successor's consolidation of power, thereby mitigating post-handover challenges from entrenched factions and facilitating regime stabilization once the successor assumes authority. This mechanism is consistent with broader observations of inner-elite dynamics in personalist dictatorships, as analyzed by Mahdavi & Ishiyama (2020), who draw on authoritarian power-sharing theories to demonstrate how the circle of inner elites evolves through shuffling and network reconfiguration. In the context of DPRK under Kim Jong-Un's early rule (2012-2015), their empirical examination of leadership events revealed suggestive patterns of elite turnover, where the regime tested and adjusted the durability of inner networks to manage loyalty and prevent factional threats during vulnerable transitional periods.

Once the successor is in charge, there's a two-stage consolidation process. First, they lean on this new base to govern while quietly pushing the previous inner circle to the margins. Second, after things stabilize, they start purging or rebalancing parts of their own new base to stop any faction from getting too strong. A 13-year-old would have an incredibly hard time pulling off even the first stage, let alone the second one. If Kim Jong-Un were to die suddenly, you could easily see a power vacuum or serious infighting break out. That might force some kind of regency arrangement, such as Kim Yo-Jong, as Kim Jong-Un's sister and a seasoned senior figure in the regime, could step in as a regent or other senior military figures take control, helping to bridge the gap, while it might undermine the whole monolithic party-state structure DPRK has relied on for decades.

7. Confucian Patriarchal Values and Role Congruity Barriers

Even though DPRK wraps itself in socialist language about equality, the society is still steeped in Confucian patriarchal values at its core. The military and party elite form a classic gerontocracy, where the ideal leader is still very much the "father figure"—stern, authoritative, protective. Eagly & Karau (2002) explain why this matters so much, as leadership is stereotyped as requiring agentic traits such as

decisiveness, assertiveness, and command presence; traditional female roles are seen as communal, nurturing, and relationship-focused. When those two don't line up, you get a double bias: women aren't easily seen as capable leaders in the first place, and when they do act like leaders, their behavior often gets judged more harshly.

Kim Ju-Ae's frequent high-profile military appearances in the parades, missile sites, and even shooting drills are meant to build her legitimacy and project strength. But in the eyes of elderly male elites who've spent their careers in this system, those very efforts probably make the role incongruity worse. Propaganda can call her the "shining star of the Paektu bloodline" all it wants, but entrenched cultural attitudes aren't going to vanish overnight. The most realistic outcomes are either a long regency period or very heavy purges. Both of which come with far bigger risks of instability than anything the adult male successors before her had to face.

8. Fifth-Generation Legitimacy and Diplomatic Capacity Risks

There's another layer of complication that doesn't get talked about as much: what happens with the fifth generation. If Kim Ju-Ae ever marries and has children, those children won't carry the surname "Kim." That breaks the strict patrilineal line that has been the absolute cornerstone of the dynasty's entire propaganda story for three generations. Owing to this, coming up with a new ideological narrative to make a non- "Kim" fifth generation seem legitimate would be completely uncharted territory for the regime, something they've never had to do before. It could easily turn destabilizing. The whole myth rests on that unbroken bloodline; once you lose the name, you lose a huge piece of the symbolic glue holding everything together.

Given these points, on the diplomatic side, DPRK's foreign policy has become intensely personal over the last decade or so. The nuclear talks, the tightrope walk between neighboring powers, the constant need to project deterrence, it all hinges on the leader's own charisma, the image of ruthlessness they've built, and the years of experience they've accumulated in dealing with the outside world. Under those circumstances, a very young female leader, especially one who's still in her teens or early twenties when she might have to step in, would find it extremely hard to replicate that kind of personal leverage quickly. She would be starting from almost zero on the international stage, and at a moment when the regime can least afford to look weak or inexperienced. That gap could seriously undermine DPRK's bargaining power right when it matters most.

9. Discussion

Nevertheless, DPRK's succession system has shown itself to be both theoretically sound and historically tough across three generations. The core ideas of Juche, the Ten Principles, continuous revolution, and the Paektu bloodline have effectively

turned hereditary rule into something almost sacred, allowing for smooth power handovers that few other authoritarian regimes could pull off.

Incidentally, with Kim Ju-Ae stepping into the spotlight, three major mismatches that could spell trouble, first, according to the insights by Piaget (1971) and Erikson (1950), she still-developing cognitive and identity stages, secondly, the likely struggles with elite management and consolidation as stated by the theory from Goldring & Ward (2024, 2025), and the deep-rooted Confucian patriarchal pushback, made worse by role congruity issues.

To put this in perspective, consider how dynastic female leaders in East and South Asia have fared. Figures like South Korea's Park Geun-hye who became president at 61, after years as First Lady and party chairperson, Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina, first term at 48, following exile, arrests, and long-term leadership of the Awami League as the daughter of the nation's founder, or Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, de facto leader at 70, with decades of dissident activism, Nobel recognition, and party-building rooted in her father's status as independence hero; all of them rose to power in mid-to-late adulthood.

These cases were selected following a most-similar design (Derichs & Thompson, 2013) to isolate the role of age at ascension and accumulated political experience in dynastic female leadership within patriarchal Asian contexts. Thompson (2002) further highlights how female leaders in Asia have often played key roles in democratic transitions by leveraging moral capital and popular mobilization. The shared criteria include: 1) explicit reliance on familial/dynastic legitimacy as the primary pathway to power; 2) operation in Confucian-influenced or South Asian patriarchal societies that traditionally privilege male "father-figure" authority; and 3) the necessity of overcoming elite resistance and gender-role incongruity through maturity, independent networks, and demonstrated achievements.

Although these women assumed power in democratic or democratizing settings, the core institutional and cultural challenges—elite consolidation, skepticism toward young or inexperienced female heirs, and the demand for a credible mature leadership image—are not confined to regime type. In DPRK's closed personalist system, where alternative legitimacy sources (elections, opposition parties) are absent, these barriers are amplified. Thus, Kim Ju-Ae's adolescent grooming represents a structural mismatch far riskier than that faced by her mid-to-late-adult counterparts (Park at 61, Hasina at 48, Suu Kyi at 70).

Table 2. Comparative profiles of selected Asian female political leaders and Kim Ju-Ae.

Name	Country	Position	Age at First Ascension	Dynastic Link	Key Pre-Ascension Experience & Education	Major Qualifications Before Office
Park Geun-hye	South Korea	President	61	Daughter of former President Park Chung-hee	First Lady, MP, Party Chairperson; BA Electronic Engineering (Ewha Womans Univ.)	Long parliamentary career, party leadership, "daughter of the nation" image

Continued

Yingluck Shinawatra	Thailand	Prime Minister	44	Sister of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra	Corporate executive (family business CEO); BA/MA Public Administration (Chiang Mai & Kentucky State)	Family business management, supported by brother's political network
Aung San Suu Kyi	Myanmar	State Counsellor	70	Daughter of independence hero Gen. Aung San	Political dissident, NLD founder/leader; BA PPE (Oxford)	Decades of anti-military resistance, Nobel Peace Prize (1991), 15 years house arrest
Sheikh Hasina	Bangladesh	Prime Minister	48	Daughter of founding President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman	Awami League leader, exiled opposition; BA Bengali Literature (Dhaka Univ.)	Long exile/party leadership after father's assassination, multiple arrests
Khaleda Zia	Bangladesh	Prime Minister	45	Widow of former President Ziaur Rahman	Housewife turned politician, BNP leader; High school + partial college	Led anti-dictatorship movement after husband's assassination, restored parliamentary democracy
Benazir Bhutto	Pakistan	Prime Minister	35	Daughter of former PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto	PPP co-chair, foreign affairs analyst; BA (Harvard), PPE (Oxford)	Long opposition leadership, first female Muslim-majority PM
Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo	Philippines	President	63	Daughter of former President Diosdado Macapagal	University professor, Undersecretary, Congresswoman; BA/MA/Ph.D. Economics (Georgetown & Ateneo)	Academic career, trade/industry roles, congressional experience
Chandrika Kumaratunga	Sri Lanka	President	49	Daughter of former PM S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike; daughter of former PM Sirimavo Bandaranaike	Provincial Chief Minister, party co-founder; Studies at Sciences Po Paris & EHESS	Multi-level political roles (provincial, party, PM), elite European education
Megawati Sukarnoputri	Indonesia	President	54	Daughter of founding President Sukarno	PDI-P founder/leader, VP; Partial university (psychology/ agriculture)	Decades opposing Suharto, reformasi symbol, extensive party/parliamentary experience

Continued

Kim Ju-Ae	DPRK	Designated successor	14 (2026 est.)	Daughter of Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un; Paektu bloodline	Limited public appearances (missile tests, parades, factory visits since 2022); no independent political role; education unknown	None established; relies entirely on father's grooming and bloodline legitimacy; no autonomous networks or achievements

Table 2 summarizes the key characteristics shared by Asian women who have risen to national leadership positions. Their paths to power rarely hinge on any single factor. Rather, success emerges from the interplay of several background conditions and supporting processes that interact in complex ways.

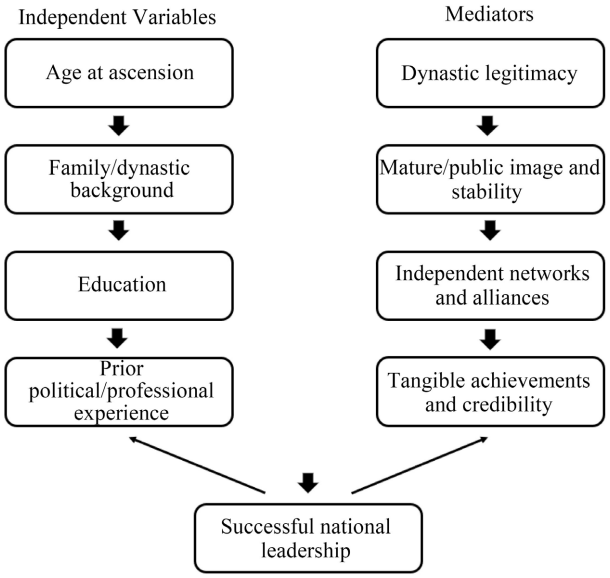

Figure 3. Causal diagram of pathways to female leadership in Asia.

Causal diagram of pathways to female leadership in Asia, as shown in Figure 3. Independent variables (age, family background, education, and political experience) lead to successful leadership primarily through mediators (e.g., dynastic legitimacy, mature image, independent networks). Kim Ju-Ae's case diverges significantly from this established model.

Although the structural mismatches—cognitive readiness, elite consolidation difficulties, and patriarchal role incongruity—pose substantial risks to Kim Ju-Ae's succession, DPRK's dynastic system retains ideological flexibility. I identify two plausible pathways, contingent on Kim Jong-Un's health trajectory and the regime's adaptive capacity.

Pathway 1: Gradual Grooming and Delayed Formal Succession under Stable Leadership

If Kim Jong-Un's health remains stable for the coming years, the regime could

extend the grooming period until Kim Ju-Ae reaches late adolescence or early adulthood (e.g., 17 - 25 years old). She would progressively assume formal roles in the Party, government, and military institutions (building on her current Missile Administration exposure), enabling her to gain practical experience, cultivate a network of younger loyalists, and project greater maturity. In a later phase, Kim Jong-Un might transition to an advisory "supreme mentor" role, reminiscent in a similar way of the influential post-retirement position held by Lee Kuan Yew as Minister Mentor in Singapore (Lee, 2000), offering direct policy guidance while allowing Kim Ju-Ae to assume primary authority.

This pathway is most likely to succeed when sustained regime stability and tangible achievements—such as military successes or modest economic gains—bolster her symbolic legitimacy within the Paektu bloodline narrative, when effective elite reconfiguration promotes technocrats loyal to her rather than entrenched older male cadres (Goldring & Ward, 2024), and when propaganda successfully mitigates gender-role incongruity by emphasizing her revolutionary qualities over traditional patriarchal expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, if these conditions are not met, her still-maturing formal operational thinking and identity formation (Piaget, 1971; Erikson, 1950) could limit strategic decision-making, even with extended preparation.

Pathway 2: Regency-Supported Immediate Succession Following Sudden Leadership Change

Should Kim Jong-Un experience abrupt health deterioration or death, Kim Ju-Ae would be immediately designated as the fourth-generation successor to preserve bloodline continuity. A temporary regency council—comprising trusted party, military, and family elites, likely led by Kim Yo-Jong—would handle day-to-day governance for several years, providing collective support similar to the informal co-regency arrangement of four loyalists installed around Kim Jong-Un by his father (Buzo, 2018). As Park (2011) observed during the third-generation transition, the regime was able to overcome the crisis and restore stability precisely because it could depend on the Ministry of People's Security and the Ministry of State Security (p. 24).

Success in this pathway depends on cohesion and loyalty within the regency group, with Kim Yo-Jong effectively bridging age and gender gaps, on the absence of major factional challenges from senior elites (facilitated by pre-existing purges and loyalty networks), and on continued external support from key strategic partners to deter exploitation of perceived internal vulnerability. If these conditions fail, deep-seated patriarchal skepticism toward an adolescent female leader could lead to passive resistance, power fragmentation, or attempts to sideline her, thereby exacerbating developmental and role incongruity challenges.

These pathways illustrate that while the fourth-generation transition faces heightened uncertainties compared to prior successions, outcomes depend on regime adaptability rather than inevitable instability. Ongoing public appearances and institutional signals will offer further indications of the pursued direction. **Figure 4**

summarizes the two plausible succession pathways for Kim Ju-Ae discussed above.

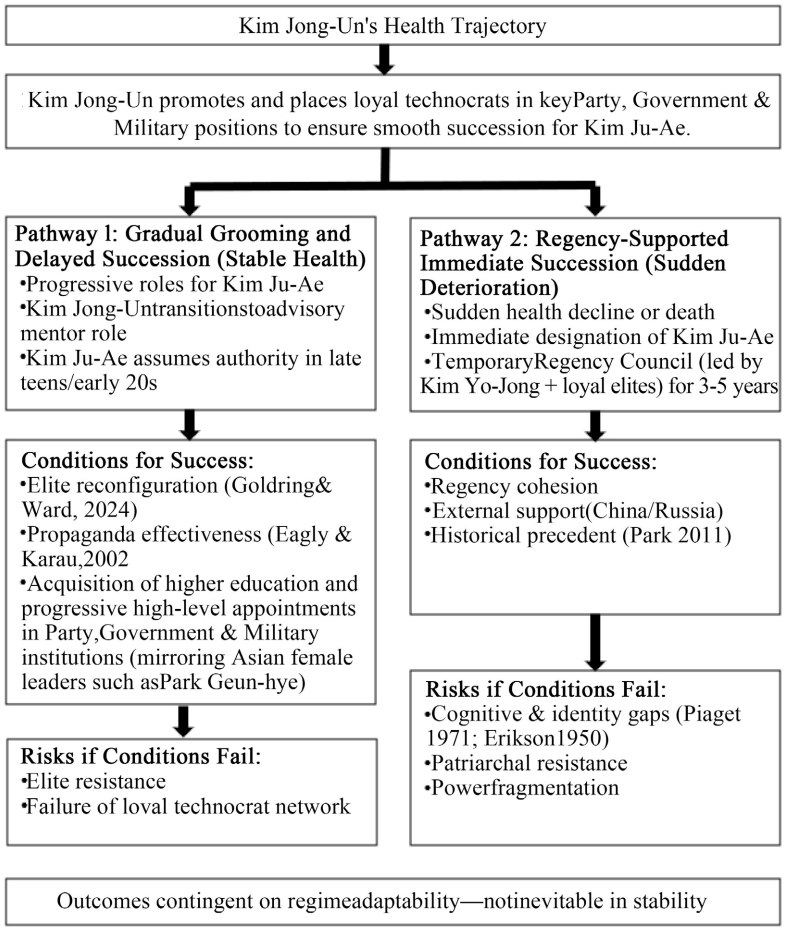

Figure 4. Plausible succession pathways for Kim Ju-Ae (contingent on Kim Jong-Un's health trajectory).

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, Kim Ju-Ae's potential succession as an adolescent female heir introduces unprecedented developmental (Piaget, 1971; Erikson, 1950), institutional (Goldring & Ward, 2024), and cultural challenges within DPRK's dynastic framework. For this reason, the regime's historical flexibility suggests continuity remains possible under specific conditions: through extended grooming and advisory support if Kim Jong-Un's health permits, or via a regency mechanism in the event of sudden change. The precise pathway will hinge on elite cohesion, propaganda effectiveness, external stability, and the regime's ability to adapt to her age and gender-related barriers.

At the same time, the vulnerabilities associated with an adolescent successor—lacking professional track record, independent networks, and mature life experience to navigate elite resistance or cultural biases—render this transition far riskier than those of her Asian counterparts. Correspondingly, as Bechtol (2013) has

noted in the context of earlier leadership transitions, such structural weaknesses could point to what might become the most unstable succession the regime has ever seen, particularly if Kim Jong-Un's health deteriorates abruptly without adequate preparatory measures in place. It follows that future Party Congresses, health-related indicators, and Kim Ju-Ae's evolving public role will provide critical evidence of which pathway is being pursued. In my view, these contingencies underscore both the resilience of the Paektu bloodline doctrine and the amplified risks unique to this generational shift.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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