



## DEF040 - PAUL FRENCH INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

### WHERE THE FUCK IS KIM JONG-UN?

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**Peter McCormack 00:02:50:**

Hi Paul, how are you?

**Paul French 00:02:51:**

I'm very well. Thank you.

**Peter McCormack 00:02:53:**

Thank you for coming on. I, like many others, have a curiosity and interest with North Korea. A fascinating country in many ways. When my friend Tom said you're the person I need to speak to I quickly listened to the show you made. I've read the article you sent me this morning. I've got so many questions. Ultimately I think a lot of people right now want to know where is Kim Jong-un? Actually, I would like to go and dig into the background before we even talk about the possibilities with that. Really, just as a starting point, can you explain what a Pyongyang watcher is?

**Paul French 00:03:31:**

Well, a Pyongyang watcher really is someone who is stupid enough, really to want to try and understand what's going on in North Korea. We always used to

have Kremlin watches and to an extent we have Zhongnanhai watchers who watch what's going on in China. North Korea is the most difficult one of all of those really. We get virtually no statistics. We get nothing we can rely on. Any statistics we do get never come with a decimal point. If they did ever come with a decimal point we'd never believe them.

**Paul French 00:04:09:**

No one will give you an interview. No one talks to you. It's very difficult to talk to any ordinary people. You can't do like all the China correspondence can, at least at the end of the day, they can say, "Well, a taxi driver told me." You can't even do that in North Korea. You watch and try and pass the tea leaves really as to what's going on. A lot of people like myself came to North Korea through living and working in China and looking at it from down if you like, from China.

**Paul French 00:04:41:**

A lot of other people of course come from studying in South Korea and looking up at the North. I think certainly for my generation, Chinese studies was a big ... I'm in my early fifties so Chinese was something that was becoming quite important at that point. More and more nowadays, we see people studying Chinese ... studying Korean, sorry, which is fantastic. Nobody much did Korean and in my day, but there's much more interested in South Korea, particularly. Obviously people go to South Korea and then they get interested in this weird place in the North.

**Paul French 00:05:20:**

It's a very strange occupation and there's probably a lot of people off in Langley and elsewhere also trying to do their North Korean watching with the benefit of drones and satellites and things that most of us don't have access to. It's also a world in which no one really knows anything. There is no great repository of knowledge. It's not a question of if I just had access to that one person or that one source, I could know everything I need to know. That just doesn't exist.

**Paul French 00:05:53:**

Even when we get defectors, and of course over the last 10 or 15 years, we've had quite a lot of defectors coming to South Korea, particularly illegally in China and elsewhere. People always forget that of course, here in London is the second largest really official North Korean community outside of South Korea. The UK government is actually ... It's one of those stories that you don't hear very often, but the UK government, despite all the problems with immigration and visas, and anti-foreigner feeling in Britain in the last few years, has actually been quite generous with access for North Korean defectors.

**Paul French 00:06:29:**

Anyway, so that's the problem. Basically, you're studying something in which you can't know very little. That makes it all very difficult. It means that when something like this comes along, which is where is Kim Jong-un? Is he dead? Is he alive? Has he had a stroke? What's going on? Who will take over? Of course, then a massive speculation floods out and all of it's about as good as any other of it really.

**Peter McCormack 00:06:59:**

Right. Okay. Yeah. The London thing is interesting because that's where Thae Yong-ho ended up defecting to when I spoke to him when he defected. When I listened to the show you sent me last night, you talked a bit about studying photographs, studying the positions of people in photographs. To me, it sounded like trying to analyze and verify information with regards to North Korea. It's almost like a Sudoku puzzle.

**Paul French 00:07:25:**

Yeah. I mean, Kremlinologists, when I was a student first doing Russian studies and Chinese studies or studying communist countries at that time, it was the Cold War and no one had much of access anywhere. People would look at who was on the rostrum in Red Square to see where all the positions were. At the same time in the last days of Mao and moving into Deng Xiaoping and who was being purged and who was returning, who was being given positions again, that was what you did.

**Paul French 00:08:02:**

That's even more difficult with North Korea, but definitely you're trying to work out who is by the dear leader, the great leader's side, who is being mentioned, who's being allowed to travel abroad, who is visiting Beijing. If there are talks going on with Seoul, as there have been several times in the early 2000s and more recently, who's there. Going back to the first nuclear crisis, which was during the Clinton administration in America, Madeleine Albright, who is getting to meet these people and who are these people?

**Paul French 00:08:38:**

Then trying to work out, of course, in the specificity of North Korea, how close are they to the Kim clan? We should never forget that the one extraordinary thing about North Korea compared to any other communist country, and I'm not even thinking China or Russia, I'm thinking of the real outliers, like Romania, Albania, places like that, is that this is a communist monarchy, right? It has passed from grandfather to father, to son and who knows where it could go next. We've never seen that before.

**Paul French 00:09:13:**

Even Stalin and Mao, didn't try that one. Therefore, not just Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, but the clan, the Kim clan around them is also fascinating. Given that under Kim Jong-un's tenure in the last few years, we've seen quite clearly the assassination of his half-brother. We've seen the very public execution of his uncle-in-law, Jang Song-thaek. This proximity to the clan, if you like, is very important in a way that it isn't quite so important in other communist countries. In that sense, it adds a level of bizarredom to the bizarre really.

**Peter McCormack 00:09:57:**

The clan, does it hold onto power through a lot of the mythology that's created around the dynasty?

**Paul French 00:10:04:**

Well, I think so. I think how we've seen the cult of personality around Kim Jong-un would be developed is very interesting because it's really agreed by everyone, even when you talk to defectors in South Korea or London or China, or wherever that Kim Il-sung really is the father of the nation. Kim Il-sung comes from that great tradition of anti-colonial fighters in the Second World War and nation builders afterwards in East Asia. He is fighting against first of all, the Japanese occupation of Korea.

**Paul French 00:10:40:**

Then of course, during the war to get rid of them living in Manchuria and The Soviet Far East, and then he creates North Korea, which of course takes him into the awful Korean War, which still technically, of course, is not over. We only have an armistice. It's still ongoing, but there's a respect there in the sense that like Suharto in Indonesia or Mao after 1949 or other people around the world at that time, these are people fighting off the shackles of colonialism.

**Paul French 00:11:17:**

Forging a country, trying to forge a different, and in the case of the North Koreans, like the Chinese, really a very independent way. Not to be completely subservient to either Communist China or Soviet Russia. I think that always meant that you had a lot of respect. Of course, because people don't have a lot of access to information there isn't a great open debate around history in North Korea, of course, to say the least when Kim Il-sung eventually dies in the early '90s, Kim Jong-il, his son takes over.

**Paul French 00:11:51:**

Now, there's a lot less respect Kim Jong-il for all sorts of reasons. We can talk about that. The point is the first absolute national emergency that Kim Jong-il has to take control of in the early 1990s is an enormous famine. A famine that

could possibly have killed 10% of the North Korean population. He has to take that. Of course, he is in many people's minds in North Korea still blamed for that famine. Of course that famine was actually the legacy that his father left him of a ridiculous style and his style command economy and collectivized farming that had been unable to feed the people.

**Paul French 00:12:30:**

Then he died and the son inherits the mess. I think that always was a problem for Kim Jong-il. Also, the problem that he was not seen as being of the military. He had to deal with that whole problem of how do you stop the military forcing a coup against you to remove the Kim clan if they don't see you as one of them? He had to deal with those problems. When Kim Jong-un comes along, that's all largely been resolved. Kim Jong-un can then start to position himself as a more interesting character to talk about economic problems, to try and address the youth of the country, which no one's ever paid any attention to before in North Korea. Also, to complete the program of his father. In a sense, Kim Jong-il was left with this horrendous legacy of famine. Kim Jong-un was left with this, in his view, quite positive legacy, which was a pretty well-developed secret nuclear program that he of course has been able to deliver.

**Paul French 00:13:33:**

It doesn't start with him even though, of course, he's the man who was eventually able to say, "Look guys, the world has to listen to us. We are protected against imperialism. We have the nuclear weapon." In the way that Kim Jong-il inherited a mess, Kim Jong-un actually I would argue, inherited quite a good shop in a sense. He was able to complete a lot of things that had been started and come out of it looking reasonably good, which is why although people outside, when he first took over thought, "Who is this guy? He's too young. He's too stupid. He looks a bit crazy. Where's his base?"

**Paul French 00:14:13:**

Really underestimated him. Here we are almost a decade later and who knows what's happened now? I would suggest that there hasn't really been serious threats to his rule while he's been there. He surprised us all at how well he's consolidated power and what he's managed to achieve in North Korea during a very difficult time of sanctions and so on.

**Peter McCormack 00:14:37:**

Wow. Okay. There's a lot to unpack here and a lot I want to ask about. I do want to work through the dynasty because the grandfather, Kim Il-sung, he's the one I know least about. What I'd like to know a little bit more about from you is obviously you talked about he came in with a lot of respect, he forged this new country. In terms of his influence and the type of country he wanted to build, can you tell me about that influence, where that came from?

**Peter McCormack 00:15:06:**

Also, I guess originally and early on, he would have had a lot of support from the people, made perhaps a good relationship with the military. Did he have to change his tactics to keep control of the country? Where there times that he was under threat?

**Paul French 00:15:20:**

Well, Kim Il-sung comes from a very strange background. He's born in 1912. He is actually ... which people always like to refer to the books. I admit to having done it myself as if it means anything. He's actually born on the same day as the Titanic sinks. Those are the two great historical events that happened on that day. He actually was born into as was often the case in the more educated classes of Korea during the Japanese colonial times, a Christian family. However, he was a guerrilla fighter from the start.

**Paul French 00:15:54:**

He spent time in Manchuria. He spent time in the Soviet Far East. He very much came under the thinking and sway of Soviet Stalinist style communism. That's part of the reason why North Korea has never had quite the close relationship with China, that people think it would do both being Asian nations, both being post-war communist countries. Its relationship to Russia was always a lot closer. Nowadays of course, when Russia hasn't quite got the cash to flash around and doesn't really care very much, the relationship with China has become more important because who else is going to pay for North Korea? That's a separate question.

**Paul French 00:16:32:**

That relationship was there. He really leads a guerrilla fight and he's known as a guerrilla fighter during the struggle for independence and the struggle against the Japanese. In a way that Tito was in Yugoslavia I think is probably the closest analogy there, as a partizan leader with Soviet backing. He comes into Pyongyang at the end of the war and he creates North Korea. At the same time, the Americans are setting up their proxy state down in Seoul, South Korea, which is effectively a militarized state at the time.

**Paul French 00:17:10:**

We could do a whole show on how the Korean War starts, but I think suffice to shortcut it and say that basically the North starts it. Now I know that there'll be lots of people who won't like that argument, but I think that's fairly clear. He fights it without a vast amount of help from Russia. They do send a few fighter planes, but not a lot else. There is of course the Chinese volunteers that Mao sends who were large in number, not overly effective as a fighting force.

**Paul French 00:17:40:**

Of course, he wages this war against larger United States. Well, now of course it was always a United Nations action, which explains why the British Army and others were there as well. He faces down the threat. This is very important to understanding the North Korean mindset. That within a few years, you throw off the shackles of Japanese imperialism, you create a new country and then you fight a Civil War during which your entire country is flattened. Pyongyang is absolutely flattened. Hardly a building left standing.

**Paul French 00:18:17:**

It looks like Tokyo after the firebombing. Of course, you are threatened with nuclear attack, right? There was a serious consideration as to whether or not to just nuke North Korea. Didn't happen. Anyway, so when the war eventually reaches the armistice and Kim Il-sung has to build the nation again, he really starts from scratch. He has to create a narrative of national struggle and national rebuilding. From the very start, he doesn't take a great deal of material help.

**Paul French 00:18:51:**

The Chinese don't really have much to give anyway at this point. Then the Russians don't offer a lot apart from of course oil flows are very useful. Anyway, he builds the country. What he does in order to do that is create an ideology. That ideology, which we can call Juche or self-reliance becomes this blend of very Soviet inflected Marxism-Leninism. It also involves quite a bit of Confucianism, which of course is traditional to that part. We can talk about that, how that influences ... Why would you see it as natural that a communist party leadership should pass from a father to a son, to a son. Why is all this important?

**Paul French 00:19:38:**

The role of women and so on, and the role of a great leader and the people answering to a great leader. Many of these answers are found not in Stalin's or the party or Mao's theory and practice. They're found in Confucian relations of filial piety. He throws in some aspects of traditional Korean values and so on, and this creates Juche. It's ultimately about self-reliance. It's about not being dependent on anyone else. He builds the nation that way. There is a narrative of suffering.

**Paul French 00:20:14:**

A narrative of struggling against the rest of the world, and if you like, what I call a theatrical victimhood that the war is still ongoing. We're still under attack. Everybody is out to get us and so we must build a wall around ourselves, whether that is a physical wall, nobody in nobody out, very little contact with the outside world. Then we must defend ourselves whether that is pointing all

your weapons across the DMZ at South Korea, the rhetoric against America and Japan, or now of course the nuclear deterrent. That policy becomes stronger and stronger and stronger.

**Paul French 00:20:53:**

The one fundamental thing that happens under Kim Il-sung and then is really accelerated under Kim Jong-il is that it takes traditional Marxism-Leninism, which of course places the proletariat, the working class at the top of the agenda. The theoretical difference there is that it then places the military above the proletariat. You have what Kim Jong-il then later develops a Songun theory, or military first theory. The military becomes the most important aspect of the society and everyone must, of course, do ... a very vast percentage of the population is in the military. Has to do military service.

**Paul French 00:21:33:**

It's everywhere throughout society. It becomes a fortress state and almost Spartan state. That in various forms is what Kim Il-sung hands down to us today. That kind of hermit career, that fortress career. What's been referred to sometimes as the porcupine strategy, right? You can't get in and touch the damn thing because there's spikes and resistance everywhere. He creates that society, which is what we have to deal with now. Which is why we don't know where Kim Jong-un is.

**Peter McCormack 00:22:07:**

Paul, I don't know if you can answer this, but, does he do this because this is his belief that this creates a great nation because he is patriotically Korean, or does he do this as a way of just holding onto power?

**Paul French 00:22:24:**

I think it's a little bit of both obviously, but I think his whole life is determined by an anti-colonial struggle. That anti-colonial struggle is against the Japanese initially. It is then of course, against the Americans and the American proxies in the South Koreans. He looks around the world and what does he see? Well, he sees lots of places in Eastern Europe becoming satellites of the Soviet Union and effectively becoming vassal states. He doesn't really want to do that.

**Paul French 00:22:56:**

The notion of a vassal state is a very big one in East Asia. That goes back through the formation of East Asia and China and so on and the Mongol Empire. He sees that very clearly in Eastern Europe. He sees China wanting to extend itself as a rival to the Soviet Union. Now he sees the Sino-Soviet split developing and the idea that you're either with Moscow or you're with Beijing. He doesn't really want to be with either of those. He doesn't see that. What's



the point of fighting an anti-colonial struggle to become effectively another colony.

**Paul French 00:23:29:**

Of course, he sees America putting in vast amounts of men, material and cash and support to build South Korea and to rebuild Japan. Of course, he sees everything else that's going on. Taiwan. He sees the British empire trying to reestablish itself in Singapore and Hong Kong. The Pacific becoming again somewhere a point of contestation, but particularly American dominated up until almost the present day, right? He's looking around at all these things and he doesn't see anything else, but a notion of hunker down and that kind of survival strategy.

**Paul French 00:24:10:**

I think it's an extreme version of what lots of other countries in the region were doing at the same time. Indonesia is doing the same as it throws off the shackles of Dutch colonialism. It is doing itself through its own political theories that blend Indonesian tradition with Islam. These things are going on all around the world in different ways. He's just the most extreme example of it at that time. You can almost understand it because who wants to become a vassal state of the Soviet Union taking orders direct from Moscow?

**Paul French 00:24:46:**

Nobody in Poland or East Germany or anywhere else was very happy about that. There are countries that are trying to go their own way, whether it be a slightly more open way like Tito's Yugoslavia or whether it be an even harder way of doing things such as a Hoxha's Albania or Ceausescu's Romania. And of course, as we get into the Korean War and all of this period, he's also looking at what's going on with Cuba, you see in the Cuban Missile Crisis, you're seeing a very real threat from nuclear weapons and so in that sense, we can almost sort of understand what it is he's doing, right? Except it becomes almost sort of pushed to an almost ridiculous extreme, and then of course it becomes about holding onto power. And also the problem of... I mean, I don't want to keep talking without you asking questions, but one of the very important things-

**Peter McCormack 00:25:43:**

Please talk, please talk.

**Paul French 00:25:45:**

One of the very important things to always remember is that when you start setting yourself up, if you like in a Confucian way that you will be empowered and then you will pass to the son and you will pass it to that, and there's a group around you, a clan, if you like, and so on. What some people have sort

of offhandedly called sort of Sopranos socialism, right? You have to be absolutely right all the time. And this is a very important thing, that the inability of anyone to say that Kim Il-sung was wrong about anything that is then carried over to say that you can never really say publicly that Kim Jong-il isn't wrong about anything. So there's never any challenge to what's going on.

**Paul French 00:26:29:**

So when things are attempted, reforms are attempted or changes in policy or attempted, and we saw this in 2002 with Kim Jong-il's economic reforms. We sorry, a few years ago with Kim Jong-un's attempt to economic reforms. They just fail and then they're never mentioned again, because to do so would be to criticize the leader because all reform has to be the genius idea of the leader.

**Paul French 00:26:54:**

And so the idea that collectivized farming on a Soviet system was the way to go, when that failed completely and North Korea just simply couldn't feed itself, who do you criticize? You can't do it. Now in China, where you have a leadership that's really party controlled and moves between different people, they're all in the same party, but they represent different factions, different groups. When Deng Xiaoping came to power, he was able to say, "Look, Mao was a great man. Mao's on all the money. Mao's statue is in Tiananman. You can all go and see his embalmed body. We're never going to trash mouth. What we're going to say is that it's the 80-20 principle, right? Mao was 80% good, 20% bad." And that gives you that 20% of wiggle room to say, "China is a great country. The communist party is leading it absolutely effectively. But you know what? There's that 20% where we want to introduce a little bit more marketization, where we want to set up in stock exchange again. Where we're going to create Shengen and let some foreign business come in and do some joint ventures."

**Paul French 00:28:03:**

You can't do any of that in North Korea because you are trapped all the time in, "The leader is a hundred percent right." And if anything goes slightly wrong, you don't have any wiggle room there. And that's been incredibly important as to why China has been able to go through this phenomenally successful process of change over the last 30 years, but North Korea hasn't. And it's a fundamental difference that goes to the very core of understanding everything about North Korea, I think.

**Peter McCormack 00:28:34:**

And is this where the mythology therefore around the Kim dynasty comes from? I mean, I mainly know it from Kim Jung-il, his gulf record, his riding of unicorns, just the crazy stories I would have read and heard about him. But did this mythology around the family start with the grandfather?

**Paul French 00:28:57:**

To an extent, and I think it starts off like all of these things probably start off, with slight exaggerations. So it's certainly, as far as we can work out, Kim Il-sung's record as a glorious fighter of the anti-colonial resistance against the Japanese is somewhat exaggerated. I mean, they were really probably more of a sort of ragtag band of Korean anti-colonial fighters with some support from the Russians doing very limited amounts of sort of hit and run operations. It's not that it wasn't important, it's not that it wasn't the right thing to do, but it's been exaggerated and that exaggeration has been built and built and built. So by the time we get to all these stories that when Kim Jong-il was born, a glacier cracked and cranes flew across the sky, and there was a new star in the sky. This is where that element of Juche which is about Korean traditional symbolism and mythology, and everything comes into the system.

**Paul French 00:29:58:**

I think what we shouldn't do is take it for granted that the North Korean people think there was a star in the sky and a glacier cracked and cranes. They understand it as a mythology, as a symbolism, right? In the way that, I don't know, in the British monarchy we understand that crowns and castles and things are all just part of the whole thing and we choose to accept it. And that is very important when you hear, for instance... And we can talk about Kim Jong-un for instance, when he's been purging people,, having fed them to wolves, right? I mean, that was one story that went everywhere. And I think that you understand that as allegory, understand that as within mythology the most worthless scraps are thrown to the wolves, right? I mean, that's how you should understand it. Not that men were actually torn apart by wolves, or when you hear that someone was shot with an anti-aircraft gun, which would of course obliterated them into pieces, it's not that someone was executed with an anti-aircraft gun, which would be a bizarre thing to do if you think about it, but it's that you understand the analogy that someone has been completely blown to pieces, right? Completely removed from this earth and removed from the historical record. And that's how you're supposed to understand it.

**Paul French 00:31:20:**

So much of this is to do with mythology and tradition. And I think that it's fair to say that North Korean people understand it as such, but it has become part of the not unattractive sometimes kind of socialist realism meets flying horses type aesthetic of North Korea, right? So the flying horses and so on, the wearing of the traditional hanbok dress, certainly by women, traditional music, dance, all of this thrown together with the kind of crazy, almost sort of surreal hyperreal graphics sometimes that then kind of merge with a Korean imitation of Soviet social realism and traditional Chinese or Soviet communist propaganda, creates this very specific, very unique North Korean aesthetic,

which I know lots and lots of people are appeal... Whenever I talk sometimes about these things, I get lots of young hipsters come along.

**Paul French 00:32:25:**

And what interests them about North Korea is not the Pyongyang-ology of who's on the roster of where's the position, they just think that a lot of this stuff, a lot of the movie posters and the giant mass games that they do with a hundred thousand people performing at 300 people watching, that kind of craziness, they find that sort of aesthetically very appealing.

**Peter McCormack 00:32:50:**

That's the Vice Style documentary?

**Paul French 00:32:53:**

Yes. I think that kind of thing has really appealed to a younger audience and kept them interested in North Korea. I mean, it's a little bit like as an old school sort of Sinologist, I sort of am always very wary of sort of going around to people's houses for dinner, who are a little bit interested in China, and up on the wall they have a lot of cultural revolution posters, and I'm just like, "Oh, not too sure about that," what that's really saying. But if it gets people into North Korea, it's interesting. And the North Koreans have sort of under understood they make a little bit of money off it with sort of stamps and selling posters and things. But what it is, is it's a culture and an aesthetic, like their politics and political theory that has grown within an isolated country. So it doesn't really answer to the outside world in any way.

**Paul French 00:33:44:**

And of course, to us, take something as ridiculous as Kim Jong-un's haircut, right? This sort of quite funny haircut, and then we don't really understand that haircut at all. And no one in North Korea would understand why that's not a funny haircut because they don't have large scale access to the outside world. And then of course, a barber Finsbury Park in North London for a joke says, "I'll give everyone a free Kim Jong-un haircut." And someone from the North Korean embassy in London is sent to the barbers to complain that, "You're mocking the dear leader." And the guy in the barber shop in Finsbury Park doesn't understand what the hell is going on. Why is he getting a visit from the North Korean embassy? I mean, that kind of level of detachment has allowed this kind of specific interest in politics and culture to grow. When it becomes a problem, of course, is when they get nuclear weapons and start pointing them at people, that's when that kind of isolation becomes a problem.

**Peter McCormack 00:34:45:**

Of course, but how institutionalized are the people of North Korea? Because we look externally, right? I'm based in little Bedford, not far from London,

normal life, if we forget what's going on in the world right now I could go bowling with the kids, and also I can go stand outside 10 Downing Street with a sign and I can shout at the government and I can protest, I can just live a very normal, liberal, Western, democratic life.

**Peter McCormack 00:35:13:**

And I can look externally at North Korea and just think, "This place seems crazy. How do these people live this life?" But internally, what is it like for the people there? How much exposure do they have to the outside world? My friend, Alex... I don't know if you know, Alex Gladstein from the Human Rights Foundation, but, and also Thae Yong-ho himself, he said, "The most important thing you can do is get information into North Korea, to young people, showing them what life is like outside of North Korea." So how institutionalized are these people? How conditioned are they've to thinking that this is normal life? Like, the rest of the world is living like this? Or are people that are fully aware that they're living under a strange regime?

**Paul French 00:35:54:**

In many ways, that's the kind of million dollar question, right? Which is, does everyone believe all of this? Do they really believe? And it's hard to say. Certainly they believe... Every country, of course, as we know in the UK, better than anywhere in the last few years, has its own national myths, which can be a help or hindrance, depending on where you are. North Korea has its extreme versions of Blitz spirit and exceptional generations, an Island nation, it has all of those myths going on. And they are manipulated by the government, as myths are in every country in the world.

**Paul French 00:36:38:**

I spend a lot of time trying to deal with young Chinese who believe that the communist party really started everything potentially positive. That women didn't go to school in China before the communist party, that you couldn't get access to Forbidden City before the communist party. Most of this is not true, but the communist party is quite happy for everyone to believe it and to take the credit. In order for them to stay in power, for regime survival, there needs to be a national myth of what I've called theatrical victimhood. That almost the second world war hasn't ended, right? That the country is still under threat of attack. Now this is not necessarily true, but it's very easy to convince a large number of people in North Korea that this is the case.

**Paul French 00:37:26:**

And of course, when we're thinking about whether or not we support sanctions against North Korea, whether or not at times, as has been the case in the last 20, 30 years, whether we support regime change strategies, whether that be boots on the ground, military solutions, or whether that be

even more tightening of the screws, if that's possible on North Korea. All of that does play into their national things. And it's easy to draw parallels that we can see ourselves. And of course, if your media is extremely limited, your access to media, if you don't have the internet, if you don't have people traveling in and out of the country, if you don't have access to foreign media, it's very difficult to say, right?

**Paul French 00:38:10:**

It's like, if you're a Daily Mail reader and that's all you read, your view of the world, your view of the European Union, your view of everything is you know, right? But of course there's no excuse for that because there's all sorts of other things you can look at. In North Korea that's not necessarily the case. So, that is a problem, and of course, that media is highlighting problems overseas. The fact that the country is still under threat from particularly the United States and its proxy, South Korea, that Japan is probably also still a threat, and nowadays probably a little bit that China is not very friendly. So that myth plays into things. And people do believe that. But what's key to the whole thing is keeping people in the country.

**Paul French 00:38:57:**

Now, there's a collective punishment system in North Korea. So if people leave the country, their whole family can be punished. And when you leave North Korea, it's changed a little bit lately, but by and large, when you leave, that's the last contact you'll have. You'll probably never be able to speak to your mother again, you'll never be able to speak to your aunts and uncles again, you'll never be able to speak to your old college friends again, you'll never be able to do anything. When you're gone, you're out. And also you won't know necessarily what's happened to them. They may have been punished.

**Paul French 00:39:29:**

So, if you're in the system... This is why so many Koreans that we see leaving the country, unlike the diplomatic defects or something, but just ordinary, regular North Koreans. If you go to the community in sort of Southwest London, they're all very, very young because you leave before you form attachments, before you get married, before you children, before you get sucked into the system too much. And you also often, talking to many people over there over the years, you often go with your parents' blessing. It's almost a kind of, "You go, don't worry about what happens to us. We're old. Blah, blah, blah." That may well be true, given longevity in North Korea. So it's not difficult to leave North Korea. I mean, you can virtually walk across the Yalu. It's very easy to get into China, find a third country. I mean, I say easy, it's relative, but it's doable if you're young and you have no encumbrances.

**Paul French 00:40:26:**

So what tends to happen with those people who have got married, who have children, who have some positions is they just sort of hunker down and stick it out. And what becomes important is family, and what becomes important is close friends, and that's what happens. So, family units, if you go in the parks in Pyongyang, in the summer, families getting together and picnicking, and group sing songs and dances and celebrating weddings and birthdays and things like that, is all very, very important because that is very important to you, your family. Within that, you just try and get on and survive. And as I say, this I think explains why people just put their heads down, carry on with things, and try and get through stuff. And there are certain performative actions that they must take every so often, such as showing support and filial piety towards the leader and the party. It means that when a leader dies, you have to go out and do your crying. It means that you're going to be in a very communal sort of life where you will have to take part in both political struggle sessions and conversations, as well as going out and doing group gymnastics and things like that, stuff that would probably annoy quite a lot of us all the time.

**Paul French 00:41:43:**

But when you go to North Korea, it's not like many Asian cities, the streets aren't crowded, there aren't sort of people in shacks. People have a flat, they by and large have what they would probably consider enough food, at least in Pyongyang and several other cities, it's different in the countryside. They have a job, they get on with things, and I think that that's how you have to understand it, that you just put your head down and you carry on. And things that may be important to us, I guess what young people would refer to as first world problems, like, "Where am I going to go on holiday?" Or, "Am I going to change my job next week?" Or, "Am I going to go and stand outside and protest against Brexit or whatever." I mean, these are just not things that are on the agenda. So you just don't think about them.

**Peter McCormack 00:42:35:**

That collective punishment, has that always been there? Does that date as far back as the grandfather?

**Paul French 00:42:41:**

Yes. I mean, there's always been that notion. There's a great Korean word for it, which has gone out of my head. And it does vary, and also no one's ever quite sure how strong the policy is. So there were always rumors flying around, which I think have at times been true, that anyone caught crossing into China and returned to North Korea by China, because they have an agreement with China that all North Korean defectors should be sent back, that they are shot when they arrive back, has perhaps at times been true, probably hasn't been

true for quite some time now because the number of people who are defecting would mean that it would create actually, anger among quite a lot of people. But the fact that that might happen is enough to scare most people. It's certainly true that there are very large in terms of percentage of the population, labor camps, and those differ from higher political labor camps to just people who are guilty of maybe minor offenses, like illegal black market selling of something.

**Paul French 00:43:48:**

And again, these things are always... It feels like there is a great lot of law and control, but there is also sort of a little bit like in China, no rule of law in a sense. So when food times are hard, there are many, many people who sort of go backwards and forwards across the border with China, buying up vegetables, buying up cigarettes, buying up whatever, and selling it in sort of illegal farmer's markets back in North Korea. Now those are occasionally clamped down on, and they are occasionally opened up, and sometimes they turn a blind eye to it because it kind of dissipates any residual anger that could exist within the society. It's a sort of alternative food circulation.

**Peter McCormack 00:44:31:**

Yeah. Sorry. When I was reading about the famine, I read that the black market was very important.

**Paul French 00:44:37:**

Yes. I mean, I think the black market is one of those things that goes through peaks and troughs, and there have been attempts under Kim Jong-il under Kim Jong-un to sort of regulate it, to sort of allow it to happen. But a part of that black market is smuggling. And that's very important in terms of bringing in information as well, which is why smuggling is still cracked down on. If you're bringing in tomatoes or something from Jilin province in China, that's one thing. If you're bringing in, as lots of people are now because there's more kind of laptops and computers and things, USB sticks that can contain vast amounts of stuff. South Korea magazines, South Korean, Chinese movies, soap operas, all of the soft power of South Korea filtering in, so that of course they're still concerned about. The major thing about markets, I think, is to break this still very strong obsession with collective farming and allow farmers to grow their own produce and sell their own produce and for a sensible pricing mechanism to exist there.

**Paul French 00:45:49:**

Now, that has happened, obviously in China, very successfully, and other former socialist countries. But as I say, to come back to this point, where the leader is a hundred percent right, and as said, collectivized farming is the way to go, even two generations later to back away from that statement is to say,



not that the former leader was wrong, but the dad was wrong or granddad was wrong, meaning the clan is wrong. What the hell do you do? How do you change this? I'm sure, absolutely convinced, and you hear this from defectors, that many, many senior people understand that the agricultural system just is an eternal downward spiral, and that they'll never get food security and they'll always be reliant on the world food program and donations, which again is a massive problem for them, particularly at a time like this, donations have been falling and falling and falling because of everything else that's going on in the world, and the sort of general, not very charitable looking face of North Korea.

**Paul French 00:46:55:**

They know that they need to change this, but how do you do it? To a smaller extent, this has been a problem in somewhere like Cuba, where it would have meant criticism of Fidel and so on, to make that change is very, very difficult. Whereas in China, of course, leaders can say, "Well, the last leader was sort of," as I say, "80%, right, but we have this little 20% wiggle room, and we're going to deal with that. We were a little too much on the urban and not enough on the rural." Or, "We were a little too much on the rural, not enough on the urban," things like that. And that kind of fluctuation, the ability to sort of, as we do of course, in every country decide to put a bit more money here and a bit less money there, or, nationalize our health service but privatize our railways. Those kinds of decisions, just are very, very difficult, if not impossible to make in North Korea, by anyone except the leader.

**Paul French 00:47:47:**

And the problem then of course, is if they don't work because they're half hearted or they're not really thought through, or there's a lack of commitment, then who's to blame, but the leader? And that cannot happen.

**Peter McCormack 00:48:00:**

Right. Okay. So I do want to get them to Kim Jong-un, but one final thing I want to ask about is the succession from Kim Il-sung to his son, Kim Jong-il, was it always planned? Was he always groomed and destined to follow on from his father? Or was this something towards the end of his reign?

**Paul French 00:48:18:**

No. I mean, it seems that the decision for the succession was taken fairly early and Kim Jong-il was groomed for that. He worked through the apparatus, but not in the military. I mean, he was never sort of walking around with a gun or doing any of that. He was involved in all sorts of intelligence operations up to, and including probably the downing of the South Korean airliner, that was a massive case at the time, massive acts of terrorism, and probably giving the order for the bomb in a Rangoon that blew up many senior members of the South Korean government. So, a hard man, but a hard man behind the scenes.

So when he came to power, he was of course his father's son, but there was a rumor that went around at the time, which comes from a Korean saying, which is, "Tiger father, dog son."

**Paul French 00:49:18:**

Which is like, trying to think what our equivalent would be, but basically, you're not as good as your dad kind of thing. You're never as good as your dad, he just created everything and handed it on to you, and you know, we don't trust you.

**Paul French 00:49:28:**

So the first thing that Kim Jong-il had to do, and which took up a large amount of his time until his death, was winning over the army. And the way he won over the army was multiple. In theoretical terms, he created the Songun line, which is the elevation of the military above all else. So you become the most important group in society in terms of your funding and in terms of your prestige. Secondly, he kind of put military people in charge and purged people who he felt were anti-military.

**Paul French 00:50:02:**

So he showed himself to the military as a hard man, and that was what he really needed to do. That rumor of him, which was partly true, that he was a bit of a playboy, big drinker, big smoker, enjoyed the girls, enjoyed the fine dining, all of that, particularly at a time of famine, didn't go down well with a lot of people. It wasn't known by many ordinary Korean people, but it would have been known by senior figures in the army, the only organization really that is capable of staging a coup. And this is a very important point about North Korea, which is, if there is a link between China and North Korea, it is not between the political class, it is not between the Korean worker's party or their communist party and the Chinese communist party. It is between the Korean army, people's army and the people's liberation army.

**Paul French 00:50:53:**

And in part, it was forged in blood by those men who are mostly now dead, but the senior generals who fought in the Korean war. So they have shed blood on Korean soil, all of them, and they have a strong relationship. The political relationship has never been as strong. So if there was a coup from the military and it was supported by China, that's really the only coup that can work, to remove the Kim clan because the politics in Beijing sees them as superfluous. And that's always been a threat that was held over Kim Jong-il and it's a threat that's been held over Kim Jong-un, by China for the first time ever joining in with the sanctions regime and so on. It's always been one of those things that we've all been thinking about all the time, could there be a military coup and if so, will it be sponsored by China?

**Paul French 00:51:45:**

However, to get back to your point. Yes, so Kim Jong-il is in power, he has to win over the army. He largely did that. And the third way that he did that was by restarting the nuclear program in secret, which of course gives them a lot of power. Now there's a lot of arguments, I think, when Kim Jong-un comes along as to whether or not having a nuclear, becoming a nuclear power actually gives the army any extra power because the control of the button, if you like, is with the political people, right? The other aspect that certainly has been developed under Kim Jong-il and then massively developed under Kim Jong-un, is cyber warfare. And again, conventional armies and militaries, particularly like the North Korean, don't always see cyber warfare as part of their toolkit, right? They see that as something else, that's a bunch of nerds in an office somewhere probably controlled by the politicians, rather than a general in a uniform.

**Paul French 00:52:45:**

So there's a lot of arguments around that. Essentially though, Kim Jong-il had to prove himself as a hard man. He did it, he purged, which of course is traditional, we've seen a lot of purging under Kim Jong-un as well. And he managed to keep the military onsite, which meant that then when it came down to who will he hand over to, it was possible to move to a non-military, another non-military leader, which was Kim Jong-un. But with the understanding that the nuclear weapons program was in place and that the army was being as much as North Korea could, funded and most importantly, socially elevated.

**Peter McCormack 00:53:22:**

And how did that succession happen down to Kim Jong because he was relatively young when his father died and it's quite a undertaking for him to become the successor to both his father and grandfather. Did he have guidance? Was he protected to begin with?

**Paul French 00:53:44:**

Again, we could go on about this all day. I'll try and do the quick version of it, which is of course, Kim Jong-il put it about a bit, right? And so he had a wife, but he had consorts as well. There are essentially three brothers, the oldest brother, and the first one who was tipped to be the successor and was groomed by Kim Jong-il to be the success, was Kim Jong-nam, later to be assassinated in Kuala Lumpur airport in February, 2017. Kim Jong-nam screwed up big time. Kim Jong-nam with his wife and their child, went to Tokyo Disneyland on a fake Dominican Republic passport and he got busted at Tokyo airport, which was massively embarrassing. Now why they busted him at Tokyo airport is a matter of a lot of speculation that may be about the consorts and

mothers of all the boys competing and tipping off the Japanese, either way that put Kim Jong-nam out of the picture, he went into exile. And so famously, as we now know, he went down to live in Macau, was seen occasionally at the gaming tables and then who knows what he got involved with.

**Paul French 00:54:54:**

But anyway, he had the face flannel of poison thrown over him at Kuala Lumpur airport, end of story, challenger gone. The second brother, Kim Jong-chul, is still alive, but was always seen as fairly weak. The one thing most people know about Kim Jong-chul, if they know anything about him, is that he is a Eric Clapton super fan. Who follows Eric Clapton around the world, going to concerts of his and has not so far shown himself to be interested in much else apart from Eric Clapton. He does pop up politically now and again, and he seems to have an understanding with Kim Jong-un and we can talk about whether or not he's a potential successor, but he has always been seen generally as weak and was not really groomed for the job. So once Kim Jong-nam was out of the picture and Kim Jong-un's mother was certainly Ko Yong-hui.

**Paul French 00:55:52:**

Ko Yong-hui, his mother, is a very interesting character. She's not an official wife, she's a consort. She was actually born in Japan. She's a Japanese born Korean and so she was slightly more interesting that way. She is now referred to as the respected mother of the nation and of the dear leader. And the argument is that she maneuvered very well. But of course, again, it's very easy for us to fall into some sort of lady Macbeth scenario with all of this. The truth is we don't really know, we're just trying to work it out. Either way, Kim Jong-un appears to be groomed, he seems to want the job. As we know, he was born in the early 80s, educated rather bizarrely at this Swiss private school, brought back, went to Kim Il-sung University, which is pretty good to go to the university that's named after your grandfather and that your father went to as well, I mean, I don't know how many people do that. And then worked within the system.

**Paul French 00:56:53:**

Of course, because Kim Jong-il died reasonably young. He came to power at a fairly young age, at a pretty young age, which was part of the reason why it was always thought he wouldn't survive. He was groomed to an extent and did have advisors, there are a number of those. The most famous of course, was his uncle in law, Jang Song-thaek. And that I think is why his decision to publicly shame and then execute his uncle Jang Song-thaek, when everyone in the Korean hierarchy knew that this was the man who had effectively been a father to him. He didn't see much of his father growing up, he saw much more

of Jang Song-thaek. This is fascinating, if you want to establish your hard man credentials, to publicly execute the man that arguably is the closest person to you in the system, is definitely demonstrating that.

**Paul French 00:57:49:**

So that was his real Michael Corleone moment. So he came to power that way, he took over from his father, then, we can talk about this next, I guess, in terms of creating his own legacy, he then decided not to comport himself and act like his father, but go back a generation and to take many of those popular and positive traits from Kim Il-sung, to craft his own cult personality, very much more than his father, as a man of the people. Kim Jong-il was very aloof. The North Korean people only heard him speak publicly a couple of times, he didn't really meet ordinary people very much. I mean, he went to military bases and he went to meet government people, but he didn't really meet ordinary people much. He wasn't a man of the people. Kim Il-sung very much was.

**Paul French 00:58:42:**

Kim Il-sung liked to get out in the crowds and ask people how things were going on. Kim Jong-un has done that much more. So he has copied the style of his grandfather, much more than his father. And it's been very successful.

**Peter McCormack 00:58:56:**

You always see the pictures of people hanging off him, children, women, or surrounded by the army. And he also always seems to be smiling quite a lot, laughing and joking.

**Paul French 00:59:05:**

And again, that's very much like the grandfather. I mean, as far as I can work out, looking at the way these things are crafted there and talking to people, he looks like his grandfather. I mean, there is a facial resemblance to his grandfather, that there isn't to his actual father. He also is slightly portly and round, well until recently, I guess, in a jolly way, if you like, rather than a dissipated way, which again is his grandfather rather than his father.

**Paul French 00:59:40:**

What did Kim Jong-un did when he first came to power was, in the way that Kim Il-sung created Juche, as his defining theory and then Kim Il-sung had the tweak of songun, or military first as his defining theory, Kim Jong-un has created the theory of byungjin, which translates as parallel development. And it's an interesting theory and you can see the logic of it, which is there are two things that have to be done and they have to be done in parallel. The first one is we have to develop the nuclear weapon, successful, deliverable, nuclear weapon, and then the world won't mess with us and that will give us security. And the second line of development we have to do is we have to do

something about the economy. We have to get people more food. We have to get people more consumer goods.

**Paul French 01:00:34:**

And this is not just because in the countryside particularly, there is the threat of a second famine, and that would be a disaster for North Korea. But also as you referred to earlier, people are much more aware of life in South Korea, they're much more aware of what's happened in China. They know people who go backwards and forwards to China. They've seen the bright lights across the Yalu river. They've seen the South Korean soaps, they've seen the Chinese soaps. You've got to give these people a few of the goodies, right? Some instant noodles and a laptop and a mobile phone or something, right? I mean, they need a few of these things, plus you got to keep the lights on and the heat on. So this line of parallel development, which is finish the nuclear program, have the bomb and then develop the economy, has been very much what he's pushed.

**Paul French 01:01:25:**

Now we know effectively that he has delivered on the first half of that, there is a deliverable nuclear weapon. The problem is that, and you could argue it's due to sanctions, you could argue now it's due to coronavirus, you could argue it's due to the Chinese locking down on North Korea as well, he has not been able to really deliver on the second option. It's certainly true there's a few more things in the shops, certainly in terms of non food items, there's a few more consumer goodies around and stuff like that, particularly for the elite to keep them on board. But he hasn't really been able to do it on a mass scale and that is because he's still stuck in the time warp of his father and grandfather's economic policies, of collective farming, of not allowing the retail economy to open up, of not allowing the national cash economy, not allowing people to make money essentially.

**Paul French 01:02:20:**

And he hasn't made those kinds of changes. In fact, he's walked back on some of that, the Kaesong development zone, which was with South Korea, which arguably was bringing some money into the country, has closed and hasn't been working for some time. There was some move towards allowing people to open market stores, small shops and that seems to have been walked back a little bit. And this is of course what annoys the Chinese so much because from the Chinese point of view, and I hear this again and again and again in Beijing, is look, we have a blueprint here, this is how you do it. We didn't just suddenly have Chanel and Louis Vuitton stores. We started with allowing people to open their own store, selling cans of Coke and instant noodles and

bars of soap. And then they built that up and people could start opening little restaurants.

**Paul French 01:03:10:**

It grew, and it grew, and it grew over the last 30, 40 years. And you invite in foreign money, but you control it very much and then you can release the controls a little bit and you use it to train your own people up, transfer of skill, transfer of knowledge, transfer of entrepreneurial aptitude, and so on. And you can do all of this, China has the blueprint because guess what, you can do all of that and have absolute total control by the party. I don't think anyone doubts that the communist party of China is in complete control of the country. And yet, if you want to start a restaurant, if you want to start a shop, if you want to change jobs, buy a flat, buy a Mercedes, whatever, you can do it, travel abroad and come back, you can do it, right?

**Paul French 01:03:52:**

So there is arguably a blueprint, but again, they're not able to change the system quite that much. And just as Kim Jong-il, I think was keen to do things, but was hit with the famine and was hit with other problems, so Kim Jong-un has maybe been keen to do things, but has been hit because of the nuclear program, UN sanctions and then those UN sanctions being joined by China for the first time. And now, of course, a drop off in international aid, which is partly because North Korea doesn't look very sympathetic, but also because that drop off of aid really accelerated during this Syrian refugee crisis, of what seemed to be bigger problems, perhaps more deserving problems, though that's a tricky one for the aid people to work out. He suffered a little bit from climactic conditions, flood, drought, even though his policies have exacerbated the effects of those and now of course, coronavirus. So often there's an intent to do something that is thwarted by external forces and external decisions that North Korea can't really control.

**Peter McCormack 01:04:59:**

Right. So now we get into the crux of the conversation, where the hell is he right now? Because I know you can't actually answer that directly and again, it goes back to your Sudoku puzzle and from what I've observed, there are rumors because of his lack of appearances and maybe you're going to tell me there's some more information out there. But I also wonder, I wanted to throw this into the mix, do the rumors also lead to maybe Western countries making some vague accusations that he might be in a vegetative state or he might have died because they're trying to provoke an actual response?

**Paul French 01:05:38:**

Yes. I mean all of the above. So I think we're always very careful about all of these rumors that come out. We know, for instance, that South Korean

intelligence loves to stir the pot, right? I mean, they love to do it. So lots of stories that have proved to be untrue over the years, women can't ride bicycles, there's only seven approved haircuts in North Korea. Ones like that, that grab tabloid headlines around the world and make North Korea look mental, are often traced back to South Korea. There's a lot of rumor flies around out of China as well, for different reasons about Chinese jockeying for position.

**Paul French 01:06:19:**

However, it is true that he has not been seen at some events recently, that we would definitely expect him to be at. It is true that there hasn't been any live footage of him or recent footage of him really, on Korean television, which always leads with whatever he's up to, whatever the leader is up to, that's always the lead story. So we don't know that. So why is he absent from from public view? Well, I've seen all sorts of views. I think the Americans yesterday or today, CIA have hinted that they just think that he's hunkered down worried about coronavirus, right?

**Peter McCormack 01:06:58:**

In hiding. Yeah, but surely with that, he could still release footage of himself.

**Paul French 01:07:05:**

Yes, he could. So that's interesting, but it may be true, but probably not. And anyway, which of his 17 mansions that we know they have, that they move around between so, there's no reason why he shouldn't be able to show himself. Health wise, well, I mean, his father had a lot of health conditions and his grandfather did as well. Calcium deposits on his neck that led to a large goiter on his neck, that was always airbrushed out of all the pictures. His grandfather lived into his 80s, his father was less healthy and doctors would always look at pictures and say, "Oh, it's liver disease. Oh, it's diabetes. It's whatever." We certainly know that he's a little bit overweight. Some years ago, he did disappear for a bit and come back wearing looser clothing and a limp, which led everyone to speculate lots of things, gout, to operations, cardiac disease. I mean, he is a open smoker.

**Paul French 01:08:06:**

I mean his father Kim Jong-il famously used to smoke Rothmans. And then, because that was seen as a bit unpatriotic for not smoking Myong Shin the local brand, he then claim to have given up and Kim Jong-un doesn't seem to care, I mean, he is often pictured smoking. There's even the famous picture of him visiting a model, a model hospital, the children's ward in a hospital and sitting on the bed with a Hello Kitty, a knockoff Hello Kitty doll, and a fag, right? Apparently he smokes these Yves Saint Laurent cigarettes that are flown in from China.



**Paul French 01:08:40:**

So yes, so he probably isn't living the most healthy of lives. However, he is only 38, right? I mean, so even his father got into his 60s. So has he had an operation? Well, we also know that the North Korean healthcare system is a problem. And even though we assume that obviously the elite and the dear leader himself will get better healthcare than ordinary people, it may not be that great and something may have gone wrong on the operating table. It may be that there is some problem with him wanting to recover enough before he is shown. In this country, we didn't see any pictures of Boris Johnson in his hospital bed because it would convey the wrong message, right? And I don't think we're going to see any pictures of someone looking pretty crap, with their gown on, in a hospital bed, it would be conveying the wrong impression. If they do bring him out again, it has to be walking down the street looking strong, right? The same as it had to be Boris Johnson walking out of number 10 to the podium, right?

**Paul French 01:09:45:**

That seems understandable. But yes, it is a worrying thing. There's been rumors that Chinese medical experts have gone down to Pyongyang. There's all sorts of speculation about his health, but there's always been speculation about stuff like this. And again, who knows who's putting that out there and who knows why they're putting it out there? I think, Thae Yong-ho, the defector that was at the British embassy and defected, and has just become a parliamentarian in South Korea, which is a fascinating thing in and of itself. He's come out with a theory today as well, about what's going on. So, I mean, we just don't know. I mean, the only thing we can say is he's in North Korea. And the only thing I would say, which is the only thing I think we can be sure of, is that if anything has happened to him, if he is dead or in a vegetative state or unable to rule, then there will be, as there was with Kim Jong-il and as there was with Kim Il-sung, no official announcement of the death of the leader until the succession is sorted.

**Paul French 01:10:53:**

So the backroom maneuvering has to all take place as to who will be the successor before it is announced. Now that took at least a week to two weeks after the death of Kim Il-sung, when it was reasonably clear that Kim Jong-il was going to be the next leader, but there still needed to be some consolidation. Similarly, when Kim Jong-il passed, there was some backroom maneuvering for a week or so before Kim Jong-un began to emerge and was officially announced and some people had to be dealt with, everybody has to be on side before this happens. And so if he has died or is unable to rule, then that jockeying for position, those decisions of succession are being made at

the moment and that of course is a fascinating, but completely opaque process.

**Peter McCormack 01:11:42:**

Well, who are the candidates? Majority of the press is leading with one of the sisters, but are there other people we should consider in this mix?

**Paul French 01:11:51:**

Yeah. Well, the sister is an interesting one. I think we can discount his wife. The sister is interesting because she is obviously a political operator. She has been very close to Kim Jong-un. She appears to have been solidly on side, even when it seems quite clear he assassinated his own and her half brother and uncle. On the other hand, what counts against her, I think, is reasonably young, although we've had young before, with Kim Jong- un. But I think what counts against her is that we have to understand just how patriarchal and old school confusion North Korean society is. We don't see women in many high positions, politics, army, diplomacy. We just don't see it. She certainly is the highest profile woman in North Korea by a country mile. So that will be the major thing that she's up against, will be the patriarchy and whether or not that's understood. Kim Jong-chul, the older brother I spoke to, the Eric Clapton super fan, is still in the mix. And one has to say that, although, of course we like to make jokes about him and Eric Clapton, it is also the case that he appears, particularly since the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, to have been much closer to Kim Jong-un. So he appears to be much closer to Kim Jong-un and to have taken on various roles in the government, which he wasn't really doing before. So that's a possibility. And then the possibility is you could go outside the immediate Kim clan, to the extended clan or the people that are very close to the clan. The consigliere if you want to use the kind of Godfather, Sopranos analogy for the system. And there's Choe Ryong-hae who has been a very close guide to Kim Jong-un, who was very close friends with Jang Song-thaek and is an interesting character because he has traveled more than most other senior leaders.

**Paul French 01:14:08:**

He has relationships in Beijing, which will be very important for whoever comes next. He has been to South Korea, which is very important for whoever comes next. And he has also, so we think, been very supportive of more effort towards marketization of agriculture and industry, which also will really need to happen at some point. Now, if you go back to my 80/20 principle, which means that the leadership can never move outside and adopt that, someone Choe Ryong-hae, who is outside of the immediate family, it's not his father or his grandfather, but they're people he was close to, so he has that strong reputation, but he's not blood with them, can maybe introduce that 80/20

principle. And maybe that can be done within a collective leadership, maybe headed by him and several other older, more established men. Do we even know how all that power struggle will happen?

**Paul French 01:15:14:**

Well, I mean, my theory ... theory, I mean, my belief is that that power struggle is probably a constantly ongoing thing. And that people are kind of constantly jockeying for position either through flunky-dom or trying to talk to ... I mean, this is the great one, right? Who talks truth to power in North Korea, right? Who tells us Kim Jong-il or Kim Jong-un when it's not going well? Kim Jong-un is very interesting in one thing. In 2014, you may remember, a residential building collapsed in Pyongyang, and Kim Jong-un was very quickly on the scene of what was a national disaster. And he actually said, "We're sorry. The government is sorry. I'm sorry. The State is sorry."

**Paul French 01:16:01:**

This had never been said before. It was an admission that something hadn't gone right. He didn't do what the old playbook would have said, which was find some official, drag them over, right? Have them cry and beg forgiveness and then execute them and then get on with it, right? That's what would have normally happened. Like it's a shoot the whistleblower approach, and this always happens in these ... I mean we've seen this in Wuhan with the doctor that blew the whistle on coronavirus, right? Shoot the messenger, right? And that's what tends to happen. And that may be partly what happened to Jang Song-thaek, that it was a shoot the messenger type purge.

**Paul French 01:16:40:**

Anyway, I think that that's about all we know. I think that's about what happened.

**Peter McCormack 01:16:45:**

Because if you're part of the power struggle and you lose, you risk being part of the purge.

**Paul French 01:16:50:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. Or like Mr. Taylor, you have to leg it fast.

**Peter McCormack 01:16:57:**

Yeah.

**Paul French 01:16:57:**

Pack your bags and go, which he could do because he was in London. A lot more difficult to get out if you're in central Pyongyang.

**Peter McCormack 01:17:04:**

Do you have a gut instinct of what's going on?

**Paul French 01:17:06:**

Well, I imagine there's a lot of maneuvering and I imagine that the Kim clan will be having their own discussions and trying to work out what to do. I mean, I would probably lean towards ... someone said to me the other day, "Well, I mean, we're not even completely sure about this, but we think that Kim Jong-un has three children and a 10 year old son-

**Peter McCormack 01:17:32:**

Ten year old, yeah.

**Paul French 01:17:33:**

Yeah. So one was, "Why don't they just try and keep it with a collective leadership that governs in the name of the 10 year old son?" So he would become like Pu Yi, he would become like the Last Emperor kind of thing sitting on the throne, but with the collective leadership making decisions. That seems to me in 2020, even with everything that's gone on in North Korea, that seems to be highly unlikely.

**Paul French 01:17:57:**

So maybe we're looking at collective leadership, but there are so many unknown unknowns in North Korea. So for instance, how tight is the Kim clan and how willing would it be to work with people outside it? How much power really do Cho and other senior and quite elderly advisors have? Where is the army in all of this? Where is China in all of this, right? Is China going to accept someone in North Korea that it doesn't like, right? Or that it doesn't think it can have some influence over? Has anyone even been thinking about this?

**Paul French 01:18:36:**

I mean, I think with Kim Jong-il, there was a lot of thought given to how the succession would work. And I think with Kim Il-Sung, given that he lived a long time and knew he was coming to an end of a natural span, there was some thought given to it as well. In this case, it's not entirely clear that anyone's been thinking about this. So I mean, it's in terms of a monarchy, there's a lot of thought about what happens when the Queen of England dies because she's like 90 whatever, right?

**Paul French 01:19:04:**

I mean, you can't not think about it, right? There's not a lot of thought as to what happens if Charles goes on the throne, dies the next day and then William goes on the throne and dies after two years of some horrible disease, right? You know what I mean? There's no thought given, no one's planning that

far ahead, right? So I don't know if anyone was planning this far ahead. I don't know if anyone was thinking about this in that way. Though of course because we don't know, we can only have all these Machiavellian thoughts that there were lots of people planning, right? Both of those theories are as valid as each other and that's welcome to the world of Pyongyang watching.

**Peter McCormack 01:19:42:**

So now it's just wait and see, and I guess as time goes on, you speculate a little bit more. Just a side question, there was a denial that coronavirus had reached North Korea. Do we know whether it has?

**Paul French 01:19:59:**

I mean, I really don't know. I mean they locked down their borders. There was hardly anyone coming in or out before. I saw one crazy rumor, that again I think it was probably South Korean intelligence that said someone tested positive for coronavirus and then was just shot. They just shot them straight away. I mean, I shouldn't even be laughing at that.

**Paul French 01:20:22:**

So no, we don't know. I mean, we'd have to put it in the list of countries that, of course, if it did get a hold down there, the healthcare system would get overwhelmed fairly quickly. It's hard to imagine, I don't know what the government's strategy would be. Of course it could do all the ... I mean North Korea has been in lockdown for 60 years hadn't it? North Korea has had social distancing and travel control restrictions and everything for a long, long time.

**Paul French 01:20:52:**

But it could still move around and there's diplomats coming in and out. And of course the way it will get in there, and people say it's too glib to say it's locked down, because as I mentioned before, there are lots of people going across the border picking up whatever they're picking up. Everything from Bibles and mobile phones to just fruit and veg to bring back to sell, right? Jeans or whatever. Those people are interacting with people in China. And so we know that it seems to be able to get everywhere, this virus. So it could be a situation.

**Paul French 01:21:32:**

Whether or not they're going to talk about it, who knows. But I have to say that every day that goes by that we don't have news on Kim Jong-un has to be a day closer to a big announcement, right?

**Peter McCormack 01:21:44:**

Yeah. It was fascinating. I mean, I'm fascinated by the country itself, I'm fascinated by what's happening, but ultimately I guess someone like you or I is fascinated and hopeful that if he has died or is in some kind of vegetative

state, and there is some form of succession, that it's something that leads towards the country opening up in some way, maybe to better relations with the world, better relations with the South, ultimately with some form of reunification, which may be years, decades away. But I guess that's what I'm always looking forward towards and hoping for.

**Paul French 01:22:22:**

Yes. And all of my writing on North Korea has always been sort of pro engagement. The problem with pro engagement is this, is you have to accept they're a nuclear power. You have to accept that, I think. And they're not going to give up their nuclear weapons. And we don't impose that condition on India or Pakistan or South Africa or Israel or France or Britain or any of the other. So if they've developed them, that that's. I think you have to take that as a fait accompli.

**Paul French 01:22:52:**

The question is then containing what they have. And the dirty little secret about North Korea is that hardly anyone cares, right? This is why food aid is, I mean, the last thing I saw from the World Food Program was that donations were 50% down on what was needed as a very basic cover. China has been making that up a little bit, but even then have not been happy about various things. So we run a very real risk, a very real risk. And people in the countryside are on very low amounts of food already, calorific intake. And we run a very real risk of there being another famine.

**Paul French 01:23:35:**

And there's a nightmare scenario of a total crop failure, combined with a medical system that outside of Pyongyang is really nonexistent, combined with a coronavirus in the mix now, and mass starvation. And of course, primarily that's a disaster for the North Korean people because they're going to die. China sees that as a massive refugee problem on its border. China's not the best equipped country mentally to deal with a large amount of refugees. It's not going to go well, they're just going to lock their border down and leave those people in there. And then we could have a whole breakdown of the country economically and then socially, which if it occurs at a time of political instability, which we may be in at the moment, could be really disastrous. The truth is no one really wants to care about it, right? I mean, South Korea has to do something about it, but many ordinary, particularly young South Koreans don't want to think about North Korea. Life is fragile enough in South Korea. Everyone has big mortgages. It's a capitalist country, everyone wants to pay off their hire-purchase, they want to pay off their mortgage. They want to keep their job, they work hard. They want to raise their families. They don't want to pay loads of money for North Korea, right? They're not really willing to do that.

China doesn't want to deal with it. Doesn't want a refugee problem. Japan has its own economic problems. It doesn't want to deal with it. And certainly European Union has no North Korea policy and doesn't want to deal with it.

**Paul French 01:25:15:**

So that of course leaves the one country that has had various approaches towards North Korea, which is America. And if we go back, what seems like quite a long time ago now, and look at the engagement that was under the Clinton administration, which didn't work ultimately, but there was an attempt to denuclearize North Korea. And I think it's always worth going back and looking at that because it was a virtual acceptance of them having nuclear power, but the problem was that the nuclear power was only being used for military purposes. It wasn't connecting to the national grid. There are still blackouts occurring all the time that means the operations go wrong because the power blocks out. There's even blackouts still reported in Pyongyang occasionally. So in the rest of the country it'd be a lot worse.

**Paul French 01:26:01:**

What if you take the nuclear reactor that you've developed for military purposes and hook it up to the national grid so that you can keep the lights on, keep the heat on, keep these things going? That's what that's kind of in a nutshell, what Clinton was thinking around. And that's why there was lots of talk at the time about light water reactors, that couldn't be used for military purposes and so on. I mean, I think it would be great to get back to that and Albright going there and Jimmy Carter being involved in that process.

**Paul French 01:26:34:**

I have to say, of course we're going to come to Trump, but I have to say that there really was no, as far as I'm concerned and I think that some people don't like to sort of say it because it's difficult because we like him in general, particularly compared to the guy we have now, Obama had no sensible Korean policy at all. He did not want to talk about it. They crafted what they called strategic patience. Strategic patience was just like, "If I don't look at it, it's not happening," right? I don't want to think about it. I don't want to get into it with the military in terms of pulling down troop numbers in South Korea, I don't want to get into it in terms of the seventh fleet.

**Paul French 01:27:15:**

Because Obama was never seen as a pro military guy, right? So he didn't want to get into any fights with the military, taking money away from them. He didn't want to get into the international stuff. He had a very sensible agenda, healthcare, and everything else in America. But strategic patience did mean that Kim Jong-un was building those weapons, right? And no one was really stopping him and that was frustrating to Beijing who don't always want to take

on a lead role in these things. It was frustrating to South Korea. It was frustrating to Japan.

**Paul French 01:27:48:**

And it was frustrating to North Korea because they want that attention, right? I mean, the nuclear weapons are about being a player, about having attention. And Obama gave them nothing. And I think when we look back sensibly on Obama's time, of course we're going to see it as incredibly positive compared to the next guy. But we're going to have to say Korea was a fail from the Obama administration.

**Paul French 01:28:14:**

Of course Trump's approach has just been, I would argue lunacy, right? I mean, you just gave the guy everything. You didn't know what to do. You didn't listen to any briefings. You didn't involve anyone sensible in the process. You had no agenda. You had no roadmap. You had nothing. It's very easy to see a roadmap for Korea, right? They have nuclear weapons, you have money, you basically in one way or another work out a way to buy the weapons, right? Through aid, through whatever?

**Paul French 01:28:44:**

He agrees to mothball his weapons. They haven't gone. He can still tell his people, "We've got the power to defend ourselves," but he kind of takes it offline and does all of that. And you send in some rice and other stuff and some fertilizer and some energy. And you promote a better relationship with South Korea, which many in South Korea are open to, and you have regional forums. I mean, you and I could sit here and craft a roadmap that may fall down on many levels, but we'll do it.

**Paul French 01:29:11:**

And if we got 50 of the best Korea watchers in the United States, when they have a lot of skill on this obviously, because since the Korean War, they've been watching Korea, and get everyone in and think about this. We can come up with some good ideas and we can get the Japanese involved, we can get the Russians involved, We can get the train line working. There's a train line that goes from Seoul to the border that then starts again at the Russian and Chinese borders and goes all the way to the Hague, right? And it just breaks ... We could get all that stuff going. We could throw the Chinese at them to build docks and railways and roads and everything, right? Infrastructure. The Chinese are our guys for infrastructure. The Americans are our guys for cash and logistics. The Koreans can go in there and get business going brother to brother and all the rest of it.



**Paul French 01:29:58:**

There is a roadmap, but Trump went in with no roadmap. He went in with this like, "I'm just a guy. I'm going to do a deal. He's going to be my best friend." Singapore was bizarre and interesting, but achieved nothing. And Hanoi was a disaster and now he's not interested. So that never went anywhere. Of course, what it did do was give Kim Jong-un massive win back at home, right? And that's where we are. And so that's the kind of ball that's going to have to be picked up when either Kim Jong-un reappears, or we find out what's happening.

**Peter McCormack 01:30:34:**

Well, it's fascinating and I really appreciate your time taking me through a lot of this patiently because you've obviously got a very extensive knowledge, not just of North Korea, the whole region, and seems like the entire history of all politics for every country in the world, and every situation. Your depth of knowledge is fascinating, Paul, I've really enjoyed this. People are going to hear this and probably want to hear more or perhaps look at more of your work you're doing. Where is best to follow you?

**Paul French 01:31:01:**

Well, I mean, I wrote a history of North Korea called North Korea: The Paranoid Peninsula, and that's available wherever books are sold, which I guess is online at the moment. And then I wrote a short e-book after Kim Jong-un came to power that really explained how that process happened, who he was, and how he consolidated his leadership and crafted his cult of personality. And I think that that's like one pound, one pound 50 or something online.

**Peter McCormack 01:31:32:**

I was one pound 39, I think. I got it yesterday.

**Paul French 01:31:34:**

Yeah. There you go. For the Kindle. And if you need a bit of prep for what's coming up, that's probably like a good afternoons read that'll give you a bit of prep and hopefully also in the book I did, like the opening chapter is really a description of a day in Pyongyang and within the e-book I tried to describe many of the buildings and the places in Pyongyang.

**Paul French 01:31:58:**

I've always thought that part of what's very important about engaging with North Korea, for us as individuals is not just the political hierarchies, is so few people have ever met a North Korean, right? Not many people have ever bumped into one on a plane or a hotel or wherever, right? And so I think if you've never met people, if you've never sort of shared a joke with them, or seen pictures of their family and shown them pictures of yours or that kind of

thing, it's very easy to see the North Koreans as just robots who just marched around to the drum of their dear leader.

**Paul French 01:32:36:**

And so therefore those people, like Bolton and people like that in the US, who might be thinking about military strategies against North Korea, almost get a kind of free pass on that one because we don't see them as human beings, right? We don't have that. It's difficult to go to war with people you've had a beer with, and had dinner with and stuff like that. So I always try to introduce the city. And of course not many people visit, even at the height of tourism. What did they get from Europe and America, 6,000 people a year or something, right? So that's difficult, but it's very, very important because the North Korean people are wonderfully inventive, creative, funny people. I mean they have a great store of what they can do, although you can never make a political joke and you have to be very careful about illusions that can be seen as being anti the leader. There absolutely nothing wrong with a dirty joke. And so they have a great store of dirty jokes. And they are great fun, and they are of course curious about the world as everyone is.

**Paul French 01:33:43:**

And I think what's really, really important about this at this moment, and the need to keep on engaging, not just in a humanitarian way, but also in a diplomatic way is that we really must emphasize, it really must be emphasized, that although North Korea is not very big and although it is closed off to the rest of the world, we must never mistake the fact that a complete collapse or a social meltdown, a complete economic and social meltdown in North Korea will destabilize the whole of the East Asian region. This is really, really important. So the first thing that we'll do is spark an arms race right across East Asia.

**Paul French 01:34:31:**

Japan will probably have to break with its traditions of pacifism in order to arm itself if it doesn't know who's in control of the North Korean military and the North Korean nuclear threat. The United States would have to ramp up the 38,000 troops it has down in South Korea and the seventh fleet and all the rest of it, right? The South Koreans will have to ramp up. The Chinese will have to move people to the border and they would have to ramp up their spending on their military. So spending, arguably wasting vast amounts of money on armaments right at the time when we might have to spend vast amounts of money to rebuild our economies, and all going to be in an enormous amount of debt is going to just make the situation even worse.

**Paul French 01:35:15:**

So I think, don't underestimate the ability of North Korea to destabilise the

entire East Asian world, which will include knock-on effects to the United States and particularly to Russia as well, who of course share a border. People forget that they share a border with North Korea. And certainly throughout the Pacific and the LOC region. And it will have knock-on effects that may alter policy. If America ramps up its presence, China gets nervous about that. The seventh fleet are in greater numbers around the Pacific starts to worry China about Taiwan. Taiwan starts to worry about China, right? The Chinese fleet comes out into the sea and all those old arguments around the South China Sea with the Philippines and Malaysia.

**Paul French 01:36:06:**

And all of it starts to ramp up and it can all happen from destabilisation in North Korea. So it's still, along with probably, what, Pakistan. India, Pakistan, and a couple of other places in the world is really one of the flashpoints that we still have to look to. And it's the one we know least about. Anything goes on in India and Pakistan, we've got a bunch of numbers we can call, right? And someone will pick up the phone. We do not have the phone numbers for Pyongyang. We don't know who to call.

**Peter McCormack 01:36:40:**

Fascinating. Well, I'm going to keep a close eye on it. And I will share those books you've written in the show notes and refer people to it. And just thank you again. Like, I really appreciate this. I always enjoy doing interviews where I learn a lot and I've learned a lot today and there's a few things I'm going to have to go and dig into afterwards. So I appreciate you giving me ... well, wow, we're over an hour and a half of your time now. So thank you so much, Paul.

**Paul French 01:37:02:**

I'm amazed we managed to do 90 minutes establishing that nobody really knows anything about North Korea.

**Peter McCormack 01:37:06:**

Well, yeah, but it's because I wanted to learn a little bit more, certainly about the grandfather because there's not a lot I knew about him before this. So yeah, thanks, Paul, appreciate your time and good luck with everything you're doing. And perhaps sometime in the future, we'll be talking again when maybe there will be a new dear leader.

**Paul French 01:37:26:**

Yeah. I mean, as I say, at some point he's going to walk out and wave at us all, or we're going to get like, the black screen from Pyongyang TV and we're going to go into a cycle of finding out who the new person is.

**Peter McCormack 01:37:39:**

Well, we'll just have to wait and see then with that. So yeah, thanks again, Paul. Take care and hopefully I'll speak again soon in the future.

**Paul French 01:37:46:**

Thanks. That was great. Took my mind off the virus for a bit.