In early January, several media outlets ran a clickbait headline, “North Korea Claims Kim Jong-il Invented Shawarma.” This fast-food dish is popular in post-Soviet countries. The statement about its North Korean roots immediately broke into negative comments about how North Korea is duping the people and making them believe that its top leaders have invented a commonly known dish.

Allegedly the source of this information was The Independent, a British online newspaper, with a text titled “North Koreans enjoy burritos after paper bizarrely claims Kim Jong-il “invented the dish in 2011.” It turns out that the dish in question recently appeared on television in a propaganda program where it was described as a wheat wrap. The major DPRK newspaper Nodong Sinmun reported that the dish was initially invented in 2011 by Kim Jong-il, the current leader’s father, and predecessor. In addition, the article claimed Kim Jong-un also takes a “meticulous interest” in the foodstuff, and its popularity is “booming.”

The author would like to give a complete translation of this short piece:

“At the stall for wheat tortillas stuffed with meat.

At the counter, you can see people having wheat tortillas stuffed with meat and saleswomen kindly explaining their nutritional value to customers.

Whenever we witness such scenes, we recall with deep excitement the image of Chairman Kim Jong-il, who was pleased during his field leadership with the newly built workshop at the Geumseong Food
When the Chairman looked into the mobile kiosk, he instructed the people to be served warmed wheat tortillas with toppings. We still recall his words that our people would be happier if they were served mineral water in summer and hot tea with wheat tortillas in winter.

Dear Secretary-General Kim Jong-un, who inherited the history of the Chairman’s noble love for people, has taken a keen interest in wheat tortillas, from production to service, and has taken steps to do so. Indeed, a small stall of stuffed wheat tortillas is associated with the motherly love of our party.”

As you can see, Kim Jong-il is not positioned in the text as the inventor of this dish: instead, he is the author of the idea to establish this type of fast food, which, again, is neither shawarma nor burrito in the classical sense. In Korean, this dish is called milssam (밀쌈) and is similar to shawarma in a wheat pita but wrapped. It is not rolled on the spot but heated in the microwave. In 2016, such “fast food” was sold in Pyongyang, including Kaesong International Park (the main recreational area for students and schoolchildren), where the author tried it himself.

The article was published in the context of the December Plenum of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, where Kim Jong-un talked a lot about the need to restructure the agricultural system, including paying more attention to wheat rather than rice. And since milssam is precisely wheat flatbread, it was, therefore, emphasized that the promotion of wheat products was not his personal initiative but a continuation of the great ancestors’ course.

This is quite an essential point because North Korea is actively trying to solve industrial safety problems by introducing new crops, which do not always take root. For example, North Koreans consume potatoes, which often save the day given the climate and topography, only in processed form - potato flour or noodles. Foreigners order fried potatoes in restaurants. Therefore, when promoting new products, it is worth recalling that their introduction was blessed as early as (in this case) the current leader’s father.

By the way, there is no such counterpart to fast food in traditional Korean cuisine, although the idea of wrapping meat in a flatbread is common throughout the world. Armenian brtuch, Mexican burrito, and Middle Eastern shawarma appeared independently of each other. And if it was Kim’s idea to have this type of fast food in Korea, he could be called the inventor of the milssam if the North Korean media had written a signle line about it being his idea.

And then, The Independent published an article about this article. For simplicity, it renamed milssam burrito, apparently because the English version of the North Korean text translated the Korean word as “wheat cakes stuffed with meat.” In addition, an incorrect translation or a conscious desire to release a fake made Kim the “inventor of food.” The media, which loves loud headlines, renamed burrito shawarma for even more simplicity, and Kim Jong-il was not credited with creating this type of food specifically for Korean realities but in general. After that, the “fake” took its final form: North Korea claims that Kim Jong-il invented shawarma.

However, thanks to the efforts of experts who quickly got to the sources, this fake was knocked down fairly quickly, so two more fakes should be mentioned that caught the author’s attention these days.

The first concern is the stylish leather trench coat that Kim Jong-un started wearing. Since journalists associate such leather coats exclusively with SS uniforms, it was concluded that Kim Jong-un sympathized with Nazi Germany. Moreover, according to Radio Free Asia, included in the registry of foreign media (citing anonymous informants as usual), such leather coat is now only allowed to be worn personally by Kim Jong-un, General Secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea.

However, almost a month passed, and Prime Minister Kim Tok-hun appeared several times in a similar coat during his leadership on the ground.

The second fake was the speculation that Kim Jong-un’s birthday on January 8, 2022, would be a starting point for a new round of the personality cult. Apparently, since according to the official version the leader turns 40, the round date will be the moment of appearance of new titles and mass portraits. But the date passed, and this didn’t happen. The day remained a non-holiday, after which the most rapid experts were not embarrassed and postponed the forecast to the next round date.

Stay tuned for more fake news busting, and remember that it often may not even be due to ill will. Rather, due to poor translation and the desire to come up with a fancy headline, as in modern journalism, the quality of an article is
often determined by the number of views. All you need to do is open it, not necessarily read to the end. Therefore, even though the essence of the text may correct a clickbait headline, it is called clickbait for a reason.

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