

# ESCAPING NORTH KOREA

DEFIANCE AND HOPE  
IN THE WORLD'S MOST  
REPRESSIVE COUNTRY



MIKE KIM



# ESCAPING NORTH KOREA

DEFIANCE AND HOPE  
IN THE WORLD'S MOST  
REPRESSIVE COUNTRY



MIKE KIM



---

# ESCAPING NORTH KOREA



---

# ESCAPING NORIH KOREA



**DEFIANCE AND HOPE  
IN THE WORLD'S MOST  
REPRESSIVE COUNTRY**



MINE KIM



ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
*Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK*

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Published in the United States of America  
by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

A wholly owned subsidiary of

The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

[www.rowmanlittlefield.com](http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com)

Distributed by NATIONAL BOOK NETWORK

Copyright © 2008 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

*All rights reserved.* No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Kim, Mike, 1976–

Escaping North Korea : defiance and hope in the world's most repressive country / Mike Kim.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Korea (North)—Social conditions.
2. Korea (North)—Politics and government—1994–
3. Refugees—Korea (North) I. Title.

HN730.6.A8K5245 2008

306.095193—dc22

2007048855

ISBN-13: 978-0-7425-5620-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7425-5620-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

eISBN-13: 978-0-7425-5733-8

eISBN-10: 0-7425-5733-2

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48—1992

To all of the courageous North Koreans who have inspired inc with their strength, perseverance, and love of life.



---

# CONTENTS

---

---

[Foreword](#) ix

Ambassador Mark Palmer

[Preface](#) xiii

[Acknowledgments](#) xv

[Introduction](#) i

[i The North Korean Mind](#) 7

[2 Inside the Hermit Kingdom](#) 27

[3 Famine](#) 45

[4 Road to Refuge](#) 61

[5 Sex Trafficking](#) 81

[6 Gulags](#) 103

[7 Christianity and North Korea](#) 117

[8 Freedom on the Fourth](#) 135

[9 Asian Underground Railroad](#) 153

[io Heroes](#) 175

[ii Restoring Lives](#) 187

[12 The Future of North Korea](#) i99

[Epilogue: There and Back Again](#) 221

[Notes](#) 225

[About the Author](#) 239

---

# FOREWORD

---

---

This is a story of heroes. Of North Koreans increasingly and courageously evading the dictates of the system at home to survive and risking their lives to flee the world's most repressive dictatorship. And of a heroic young Korean American, the author, Mike Kim, who risked his own life for four years on the China-North Korea border to help them.

Why is this book of critical importance to you? Two and a half million people died when North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung invaded South Korea in 1950. According to Freedom House, up to another two and a half million people starved to death as the result of his son Kim Jong Il's policies in the 1990s. With nuclear weapons now at his disposal, South Korea, Japan, and the United States could suffer losses that would dwarf even these horrendous earlier numbers.

The ingenuity and courage of individual North Koreans, colorfully related in the following pages, point the way to a peaceful solution. They show that conventional pessimism about the prospects for radical change in the Hermit Kingdom is wrong.

I am all too familiar with this pervasive and dangerous inability to see a people's capacity to stand up and gain their freedom—with encouragement and practical help from outside democrats. The overwhelming conventional wisdom about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for decades had been that it too was preordained to suffer forever more under the heavy hand of Communist dictatorship.

Fortunately a sunny Californian, Ronald Reagan, became president in 1981 and stood the conventional wisdom on its head. I was then the senior State Department official in charge of our relations with the Soviet Union. I helped draft his speeches and organized and participated in his first meetings with Gorbachev. President Reagan spoke with confidence about "a world in which all people are at last free to determine their own destiny."

Despite the derision with which these remarks were met, just a few years later the barbed wire on the Hungarian-Austrian border was pulled down. By then, I was the American ambassador to Hungary and had a front row seat, even played a certain role, in the unfolding drama. Young East Germans had fled to Hungary and wanted to move on to Austria and West Germany. Under pressure, the Hungarian Communists finally allowed these East Germans passage to freedom. This was a critical step toward the fall of the Berlin Wall a few months later—and the reunification of Germany as a democratic and peace-loving state.

The parallels with North Korea are striking. Another nation artificially divided by the Communists witnesses tens of thousands of its citizens fleeing to a neighboring Communist country, in this case China—in hopes that they can eventually reach the other half, the prosperous and democratic South Korea. The most direct route across the Demilitarized Zone, the equivalent of the Berlin Wall, is largely impassable. China resists its international obligation to these refugees, just as Hungary initially did but eventually gave way.

The lessons are clear. A regular flow of refugees, particularly one that includes the young and elite

managing to get through to the free half of the country can remove the glue of fear that keeps the dictator in power at home. Just as in East Germany, if the pillars of support for the dictator begin to see that the emperor has no clothes, they will change sides.

The most important support for a dictator is his security services and their willingness to obey his orders and to use force against their own people. In the some 60 successful nonviolent democratic revolutions over the past four decades, the eventual unwillingness of the security services to obey his orders and use force has been the most important factor.

Mike Kim records absolutely fascinating experiences with North Korean soldiers and border guards and ordinary citizens' interactions with them. Border guards are freely taking bribes to let people cross the China-North Korea border in both directions. A soldier recounts that many soldiers hate their own officers so much that they would fire on them rather than the enemy if a war arose. Knowledge of elite privileges is widespread, with derogatory comments about only the elite having cars, even the most expensive Mercedes-Benz.

Mike Kim documents the emerging discontent, the rampant unemployment, the absolute impoverishment of the majority, and the necessary resort to theft and other forms of criminal behavior just to survive.

I met Mike in December 2003. He had just returned to the States after a year of working with North Korean refugees at the China-North Korea border. It was the first of many conversations that we would have about North Korea.

In July 2001, Mike took a two-week vacation to China and met with North Korean refugees for the first time. Through those meetings, he learned about the North Korean refugee crisis as he listened to their horrific stories of suffering. He was so deeply moved by those encounters that he returned to the States and quit his financial planning business to prepare to move to China. In January 2003, he left for China on a one-way ticket and with only a couple of contacts in his PDA.

While I have met a handful of people working with North Korean refugees, I know of no one else who packed their bags and moved to the border.

Throughout the course of that first year, Mike assisted North Korean refugees by providing food, clothes, medicine, and shelter. His efforts eventually gave birth to Crossing Borders, a nongovernmental organization that has set up multiple shelters and orphanages for North Korean refugees in China. The following year they expanded their operations by sending teams into North Korea on a monthly basis to provide humanitarian assistance. Since then, Crossing Borders has become one of the main groups operating at the China-North Korea border.

In 2005, Reuters interviewed Mike regarding his work. In 2006, his organization delivered testimony at a U.S. congressional hearing on Combating Human Trafficking in China. He has worked his way into North Korean circles and has gained unique knowledge about the country and its people.

The international community can learn much from this book. The concluding chapter has recommendations from a cross section of policy experts for specific actions that can be taken across the broad front to help North Koreans and thereby to bring true peace and freedom to the Korean peninsula. Mike's own policy views are an impressive mix of deep caring and moderation,



sophistication and nuance about what can and should be done. Let me therefore encourage you to go on this journey with Mike Kim inside North Korea.

---

-Ambassador Mark Palm

---

# PREFACE

---

---

This is a book about my experiences with North Koreans at the China-North Korea border. Some names, identifying details, locations, dates, and times have been changed in order to protect people's privacy and ensure their safety. The North Koreans in this book have dispersed to different locations since their interviews. Some are still hiding in Crossing Borders refugee shelters in northeast China. A few successfully found asylum in South Korea and the United States, while others were captured attempting to get there and repatriated. Some will be in a North Korean prison or gulag at the time of your reading. Then there are the courageous few who returned to North Korea to help their families and communities. Unfortunately, some of the people I write about in this book have died of disease. Others, I believe, have been executed by the North Korean regime.

It is necessary to say something about Korean names. In the Korean culture, the family name is used first, as in "Kim Jong Il," where "Kim" is the family name. For the most part, I have thus used the family name first throughout the book. In Korean culture it is also considered rude to address an older person by their first name. In order to maintain the spirit of my relationship with my interviewees, I refer to those who are older than I by their last name (e.g., Mr. Lee) throughout the book. In addition to not using first names, Koreans will often use titles when addressing each other (e.g., Teacher Kim or Pastor Lee).

Since I was born and raised in the States, people often ask how I learned the Korean language. Growing up I always spoke English with my parents at home, so I never had the opportunity to learn Korean very well. My limited vocabulary included basic phrases I used with my grandparents and other Korean-speaking relatives. When I moved to China, I had a very difficult time communicating with the Korean-Chinese there. (My Korean-Chinese staff still make fun of me to this day about how hard it was to understand me when I first arrived.) However, since I grew up hearing Korean spoken between my parents and among my relatives, I was able to pick it up at an accelerated pace and became fairly fluent as I began to speak the language every day.

As for Mandarin, I never formerly studied the language. During my first two months in China, I traveled the country with a group of Chinese Christian leaders and as a result was forced to learn basic Mandarin very quickly.

One final note: During my four years in China, many friends, colleagues, and even roommates did not know the real reason for my stay in China. When they asked me what I was doing at the China-North Korea border, I told them that I was a Christian executive or a martial arts student training in the North Korean style of tae kwon do (both of which were true). I believed that it would be best for both them and me if they didn't know the true nature of my work. When they learn of this book and its real work in China, I hope that they will understand why I couldn't tell them the true reason for my stay in China. I would like to apologize to them for all of the secrets over the years and trust that this book will go a long way in explaining a few things.

---

---

To learn more about Crossing Borders or how you can support its work, please visit [www.crossingbordersnk.org](http://www.crossingbordersnk.org).

---

---

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

---

First and foremost, I must thank God because if it were not for a strong and overwhelming sense calling, I would never have packed my bags and made the move to the China-North Korea border. Second, I owe much to all of those who believed in me enough to financially support my work, especially in the early years. It was their financial support that allowed me to attempt the things that I write about in this book. Additionally, the Crossing Borders U.S. staff will always have a special place in my heart. They have shown tremendous commitment to our work and dared to dream big dreams with me. Together we enjoyed the powerful results of combining faith and humanitarian aid. And without a close group of organizational partners, mentors, teachers, and advisors, the organization would not be where it is today. I would like to specifically thank Voice of the Martyrs, Tim Peters, Pastor Ahn, and Pastor Kim—as well as other organizations and individuals that, for security reasons, cannot be named here—for their partnership and support throughout the years.

I would like to thank Ambassador Mark Palmer for introducing me to Rowman & Littlefield and for his valuable advice on my work throughout the years. I would also like to thank Susan McEachern, the executive editor at Rowman & Littlefield, for her enthusiasm ever since we first discussed the concept of this book back in 2004 and for her continual guidance since. She patiently answered my hundreds of questions as I was working on the manuscript. Jehanne Schweitzer, senior production editor at Rowman & Littlefield, invested much time in the project and copyeditor Desiree Reid made significant improvements in the manuscript. Tom Wells, the developmental editor for the book, also provided guidance and spent many hours editing the manuscript. Peer reviewers D. C., Amy, Susie, E. Sohn, and Abe Lee read the manuscript, including multiple revisions, and gave critical feedback; some even took days off from work to do so. Ambassador John Miller, Professor Donna Hughes, and Lisa Thompson gave significant advice on chapter 5. Tom White from Voice of the Martyrs, Carl Moeller from Open Doors USA, and Ann Buwalda from Jubilee Campaign USA offered valuable insights for chapter 7. For chapter 12, I interviewed some leading figures involved on the North Korean issue and asked them, "What are some steps that can be taken to resolve the North Korean crisis?" I would like to thank them and everybody else who took the time to talk to me. I would also like to thank Suzanne Scholte, president of the Defense Forum Foundation, for making many key introductions for my interviews for this book. Additionally, I would like to thank the Honorable SongYoung-Sun, Professor Charles Armstrong, and Kenny Kim for their contributions to this project.

This book would not have been possible without the work of many translators in the United States and Australia who spent countless hours translating documents and audio files of interviews with North Koreans. I also owe special thanks to Peter and Bethany in Gainesville, Florida, who let me stay at their home (and play free on their golf course!) for four months until I finished the manuscript. Finally, I would like to thank my nioni, dad, brother, and sister for their financial and emotional support during this unique season of my life. My mom paid for a large part of my college tuition, making it financially possible for me to leave for China at a young age. I believe that I got much of my ability to persevere and overcome great challenges from watching her live her life. Thanks, Mom!

---

---



---

# Introduction

In November 2004, I was in northern Laos standing in the back of a truck with six angry soldiers pointing their AK-47s at me. I was leading two North Korean refugee women through the 6,000-mile modern-day underground railroad that begins in North Korea and runs through China and Southeast Asia. We hoped to gain asylum for them in South Korea. We had just illegally crossed the border from southern China into Laos and had been captured by border patrol soldiers. As I stood there with my hands in the air, I thought to myself, "How in the world did I ever get myself into this?"

A few years earlier, in June 2001, I had been living in Chicago and had my own financial planning business. I had a steady flow of clientele and had been awarded for generating the most revenue in the office that month; I had just hired a personal administrative assistant to help manage my workload. Life was good, and my future was looking very bright. In late June, I had my assistant, Elaine, clear my schedule so that I could take a two-week trip to China. I had always wanted to visit China primarily because I had heard many stories about the persecution of Christians there and wished to witness religious persecution firsthand. As a Christian, I was always interested in the issue and wanted to explore it further.

Pastor Joo, a man who regularly traveled to China to work with house churches, allowed me to travel with him on one of his many trips to the country. We traveled throughout China—from Beijing to the northeast, to the south—finally concluding our trip in Xinjiang Province in northwest China. As we traveled from church to church, I was awed by how Christians in this part of the world lived. I heard testimony after testimony of religious persecution and was deeply moved by their displays of faith and devotion.

At one of the house churches, Pastor Joo pointed to Ji-Eun, one of the many adorable orphans living at the church, and indicated, "She's a North Korean refugee." A bit confused, I asked, "What's a North Korean refugee?" I was a Korean American, but I had never heard of a North Korean refugee. He explained that because of the famine and oppression in North Korea, hundreds of thousands of people were fleeing to China in search of food and freedom.

Ji-Eun's grandfather had piggybacked her for days through the mountains of North Korea without any food, Pastor Joo told me. When he had arrived at the border, he had taken her in his arms and swum across the Tumen River, which divides China and North Korea, at the risk of being shot by North Korean border patrol soldiers. After crossing the river, they had continued for days through the mountains of China, again without food, evading the police. Unable to speak Mandarin and not knowing a single person in the country, he had stumbled across the house church we were visiting and dropped off Ji-Eun. "Please take care of my granddaughter," he had said. He had then run away in order to protect her—if the Chinese authorities had apprehended him, they would have both been repatriated to North Korea. Ji-Eun hasn't seen her grandfather since.

Throughout my time in China, I met many other North Korean refugee children and listened to their horrible stories of suffering. My heart went out to them. They were living in a constant state of fear, hiding in small house churches. The church leaders told me stories of frequent police raids where the authorities came looking for refugees. Those who were not at the churches were able to escape while the less fortunate were captured and forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

I returned to the States a bit shaken from what I had experienced. I distinctly remember sitting ~~across from clients talking about mutual funds, retirement plans, and insurance while feeling~~ disengaged from it all. The "underground" house churches in China and the North Korean refugees weighed heavily on my heart.

One day shortly thereafter, I was standing in front of the large world map on the wall in my room. I put my hand on China and prayed for the country. Then I put my hand on North Korea and prayed for it. At that moment I knew what I had to do-go to China.

I moved to southern California to prepare and train for one year before leaving. While in California I took classes in intercultural studies and met with leading individuals involved in refugee work. I wanted to learn everything that I possibly could about the North Korean refugee situation before departing.

My time in California was a crucial step in my preparation for the field. With finances tight, I had to learn to be resourceful and live frugally. I made certain sacrifices and downgraded many aspects of my life. I slept on the floor, not only because I didn't want to spend the little money I had on a bed but also to prepare myself for the rigors of the field (an idea I got from Hudson Taylor, an influential British Christian missionary who served in China during the nineteenth century). I couldn't always eat what I wanted, as I had been accustomed to doing, and there were occasions when, for the first time in my life, I skipped meals to save money. In short, it was an important time for me to learn the discipline of simplicity that would be necessary in China.

My time in California was also a crash course on faith. For the first time in my life, I had to trust God for things that I was used to taking care of on my own. For example, I no longer had a source of income, and so my livelihood depended on the donations of others. This was probably the most difficult thing for me to get used to. In the end, my training paid off. Little did I know that the small trials I experienced in southern California would prepare me for much greater hardships in China.

On December 31, 2002, after a year of training in California, I sent the following e-mail to a group of supporters: "I can't believe the time is finally here. I have a one-way ticket to China and leave tomorrow at 1:00 P.M. ... So, I'm finally going. Many of you have joked that you thought that day would never come. Well, I'm really going (unless I miss my flight tomorrow). I somehow managed to fit everything into two duffle bags"

The next afternoon, on New Year's Day, I was on a United Airlines flight to China. I had no idea what city I would live in, or who I would stay or work with. Once I settled down at the China-North Korea border, I determined that the next step was to find a way to come in contact with North Korean refugees who were in hiding. I wanted to help the refugees but had no clue as to how I would meet any.

I eventually met several Korean-Chinese who put me in contact with some refugees. A few small refugee shelters along the border eventually evolved into Crossing Borders, a Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to assisting North Korean refugees at the border. The Korean-Chinese became staff members. We have since helped hundreds of North Koreans over the years by setting up other refugee shelters, starting orphanages for abandoned children, and sending teams of Korean-Chinese staff into North Korea.

The majority of my time in China was spent with the North Koreans in our shelters. We spent a lot of time at the dinner table talking, laughing, and telling stories. Sometimes I slept over or hid in the shelters with them, and we found ways to pass time by playing cards or board games. When we got tired of playing games, we told stories late into the night about our lives. Whenever it was safe to go outside, we played badminton, volleyball, or soccer. We also took frequent hikes up the nearest mountain.

As our friendships grew, I earned their trust. They opened up and shared their deepest secrets with me—things they had never told any one else. They have given me permission to share their stories with you in the following pages. "If more people know, then more people can help," one North Korean woman told me.

This book is an intimate portrait of the lives of my North Korean friends. As they told their stories, I often sat with pen and paper or digital recorder in hand and listened to them talk for hours. They spoke about their government's brainwashing tactics and offered their true thoughts about the regime. Civilians and soldiers discussed how North Koreans view Americans and their sentiments on war with the United States. Children told me about the suffering they endured during the famine in the 1990s, their methods of survival, and family members lost. Women and young girls described their experiences in sex trafficking and the horrible abuse they endured. Others spoke in detail about beatings, torture, executions, and the persecution of Christians in the gulags.

In *Windows of the Soul*, Ken Gire wrote, "Stories give us eyes other than our own with which to see the world." He offered the following prayer: "Reveal to me through stories something of what it is like to walk around in someone else's shoes. Show me something about myself in the stories I read. Enlarge my heart with a story, and chat e me by the characters I meet there" (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> North Korea in its current state doesn't have much it can offer the world, perhaps just its inspirational stories of hope. It's my hope that your heart will be enlarged by these stories and that you will be changed by the characters you meet here.

We can learn a great deal from the North Koreans, the refugees in particular. They call me *Suusaeugnim*<sup>2</sup> (Teacher), but I have learned so much more from them. It's also my hope that some of the international community will be mobilized to take action by their stories, which teach us much about North Korea and the plight of its people. The North Koreans have much to teach us about life, too. When I travel and speak about the plight of North Korea, at least one person will usually come up to me and say, "Thank you for your talk. Today I learned that I really don't have much to complain about." I have often thought that if the North Koreans can scale their mountains, then I can make it over this next hill of mine.

My life was changed by these people and these stories, and it is my hope that they will somehow touch and inspire you as well.



---

**ONE**



---

# The North Korean Mind

---

What we don't know about North Korea is so vast that it makes the Kremlin of the 1950s look like an open book.

-Arnold Kaner, U.S. undersecretary of state under President George H.W. Bush

Although everyone is familiar with President George W. Bush's "axis of evil," most people are unaware of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il's counterpart. Shortly after Bush placed North Korea on his axis of evil, Kim Jong Il countered with his own version. It also comprises three countries: the United States, Japan, and South Korea. If you bumped into any North Korean on the street and asked her to name the three worst countries in the world, without a moment's hesitation she would reply "The United States, Japan, and South Korea" If you asked her to rank the countries starting with the most wicked, she would reply, as if programmed, "The United States is the most evil country in the world. Japan is a close second. South Korea is the least evil of the three"

After meeting hundreds of North Koreans, it has become clear to me that, when it comes to worldviews and politics, all North Koreans have mastered the propaganda line. They are very predictable. South Korea is the least evil country in Kim Jong Il's axis because it is, in the eyes of the North Korean regime, simply a victim of U.S. imperialism. The regime believes that South Korea has been manipulated by the United States and sees it as its duty to rescue its misguided brethren. Almost all North Koreans will complain, as one agent in the North Korean National Security Police (Bowibu, the rough equivalent of the FBI, did to me, "It is because of America that Korea cannot be unified"

Japan is ranked second on North Korea's axis of evil because North Koreans (and some South Koreans) have not forgotten about the Japanese occupation of once-unified Korea. Horrific stories of persecution, rape, and murder abound. Many Koreans to this day blame Japan for the current division of Korea. They suffered a great deal during the Japanese occupation, and Koreans (North and South alike) have had a difficult time letting go of the past. Their bitterness is expressed through the refusal to buy Japanese products. Some Korean parents forbid their children to marry a Japanese person. It was no coincidence that in 1998 North Korea test-fired a missile that flew over Japan. North Korea is still asking Japan to pay reparations for its colonial rule of the Korean peninsula.

The United States tops North Korea's list, and hatred toward Americans is evident in the very fabric of the language. Ak (evil) may be the single most commonly used word to describe Americans. The derogatory term nom, similar to calling someone a bastard, is inevitably attached to the end of any word referring to Americans. For example, Mee-guk is the Korean word for America, so a North Korean will always call an American a Mee-guk nom. He would never say Mee guk saram ("American person"). During a three-day visit I made to North Korea in February 2004, I heard this phrase used many times. At dinners with government officials, I was surprised to hear them use it repeatedly in front of me without the slightest bit of hesitation. In their minds, they weren't saying anything wrong; they were simply using proper language to refer to Americans.

While living in China from 2003 through 2006, I had the unique opportunity to study North Korean taekwon do with North Korean instructors sent from Pyongyang for several years. In the process of earning a second-degree black belt, I got to know them well. When I asked Master Chung, my eighth

degree teacher, about this Mee guk nom phenomenon, he replied, "Oh, we learn that from a young age. ~~We don't know of any other way to refer to Americans. When I was a kid, if there were some kids fighting or doing bad things, you would hear people say, 'They're going to turn into a Mee-guk nom'~~ was the worst possible insult. Even in school we learned that Americans and Japanese are the worst people on the face of the earth."

I wanted to get a second opinion, so I asked Mrs. Cha, a North Korean woman in her early thirties about this. I took her and her family out for pat-bing-su, a Korean dessert made of ice cream, crushed ice, fruit, and red beans (it tastes much better than it sounds). It was the first time she had tasted the treat. As we were eating, I asked her if I was the first American she had ever met. Yes, I was, she responded. Laughing, I remarked, "I bet you were really scared of me when we first met." She smiled and sheepishly replied, "Yes, I was very scared of you because you were an American." I told her that I had just returned from North Korea and couldn't believe that they call all Americans Mee-guk nom there. In my meetings with government officials, they had said it as if I wasn't even there. She laughed and confessed, "I also used to say that a lot."

Mrs. Huh, a North Korean refugee woman also in her early thirties, commented, "In North Korea they tell us that the reason our lives are so bad is because of Mee-guk nom. They tell us, 'Let's toughen up and make it through this' People think, 'I don't mind eating gruel everyday as long as Mee-guk nom don't take over our country.'"

Mrs. Yoon, a North Korean refugee recently diagnosed with cancer, was hiding in one of our refugee shelters in China. "I used to say Meeguk nom a lot," she told me. "Now I don't say that any more. Now I just say Mee-guk saram. In North Korea, we don't have our own rice, right? All the rice that we have is either from the United States or South Korea. How could I continue to hate Americans when they provide the very rice that sustains us?"

The Korean word for Japan is Il-Bun. North Koreans will always refer to Japanese people as Il-Bun nom. Yet North Koreans will never refer to South Koreans in this derogatory way.

## **BRAINWASHING: NORTH KOREA'S MOST POWERFUL WEAPON**

In April 2003, I attended a North Korea symposium in Seoul, South Korea, where Suzanne Scholtz, president of the Defense Forum Foundation and a leading North Korean human rights activist, gave the speech. In her talk, she referred to Colonel Joo Hwal Choi and diplomat Young Hwan Ko, the first North Korean defectors brought to the United States to testify at a congressional hearing:

What was particularly disturbing about their testimony was not just how horrible things were in North Korea, but how this North Korean regime brainwashed its own citizens into hating us. Colonel Choi described a children's schoolbook in North Korea in which students were taught how to add with such equations as "If you threw a grenade and killed two American GIs, and your friend threw a grenade and killed three American GIs, how many American GIs would you and your friend have killed?"

In June 2003, I discussed the topic of brainwashing with two teenage North Korean boys living in one of our refugee shelters. Chul and Sung had been hiding in China for two years under extremely difficult circumstances. I mentioned to them that I had heard that children in North Korea were taught math in the way Colonel Choi described. They smiled, looked down at the floor in embarrassment, and

said that it was true. "We're here talking and joking around like this now, but what would it have been like if I had met you when you first came to China?" I asked them. "Oh gosh!" one replied. "We would have been so scared of you that we wouldn't have been able to talk to you at all! We wouldn't have even been able to look you in the eyes"

The leaders of North Korea understand that the future of their regime depends on the effectiveness of their brainwashing (though, of course, they don't call it that). They take their brainwashing seriously and go to painstaking lengths to ensure maximum control over the minds of their people.

When I lived in China, I often visited a particular spot at the China-North Korea border that overlooks a North Korean village. During one visit, a local villager who had lived in the border area for many years commented, "They have no electricity for the common people over there. The only electricity that the village has is used for propaganda that is played over the speaker system. Propaganda is played all throughout the day" He added, "It is like their Bible. They have to hear Kim Jong Il's words every day-morning and night" The same holds true for many villages in North Korea.

Instilled into the North Korean psyche is a deep-seated fear of Americans. One of the regime's central tactics is to keep its citizens constantly aware that there is an enemy. This is accomplished by demonizing Americans. From birth, North Koreans are bombarded with messages teaching that Americans are the root of all evil. Michael Breen, author of *Kim Jong-il: North Korea's Dear Leader*, tells of buying an English phrase book in Pyongyang, North Korea, that taught verb tenses in the following manner: "We fight against Yankees. We fought against Yankees. We will fight against Yankees" Another phrase was "Let's mutilate US imperialism!"

A Pyongyang-endorsed biography of Kim Jong Il tells the story of how he, at eight years old, confronted a U.S. pilot who was shot down in North Korea during the Korean War. According to the book, Kim stepped forward in front of all his classmates and said, "Look at that fellow, how frightened he is and what a poor figure he is cutting. No matter how many packs of those brutes may attack us, we need not fear them. We should beat the wolves mercilessly with a stick" The biographer continues, "Then he appealed to the schoolchildren to carry on the work of aiding the soldiers on the battle line more actively in order to crush all the U.S. imperialists, since they had now clearly seen what the enemy looked like."<sup>2</sup>

Tom White is the executive director of Voice of the Martyrs, an organization committed to helping persecuted Christians around the world. He once spent 18 months in a Cuban prison for distributing Christian literature. He had the opportunity to visit Pyongyang and recalled being taken to a museum (see photo):

We went to a "Museum of Hatred" in the southern part of North Korea.... This is a museum a couple of stories tall. Outside were several hundred elementary school children waiting for the tour. Inside were paintings of Americans driving spikes through the skulls of Korean women and children, saying that this is what the American people are.... We went through the two floors and it was very sad ... all hate. It was about 80 percent anti-American ... Then they herded all of the elementary kids in there to say this is America, this is the West, this is the enemy.<sup>3</sup>



An anti-American painting in a North Korean museum near Pyongyang. The caption reads, "Harrison gang forcibly commits a brutal massacre of the people at Lake Lotus Bong Jun." (Voice of the Martyrs)

During one of my tae kwon do workouts, Master Chung told me about some of the many anti-American games he played in class as a child:

Sometimes the teacher hung up a picture representing America. Then when the teacher signaled, all the children in class took a sharp object, charged at the picture screaming at the top of their lungs, and then ripped it up. During wintertime, I remember the teacher telling us to make two snowmen. On one snowman we wrote "America" and on the other we wrote "Japan." . . . With sticks in our hands, we would scream at the top of our lungs, charge at the snowmen and break it.

Games like this are still being played in North Korea and are encouraged by elementary school teachers. Imagine a country full of people who are taught and encouraged to hate like this from birth.

The North Korean regime has a variety of mediums through which it brainwashes its people: the daily news including the newspaper, speeches, literature, and signs posted throughout the country. The Rodoug Shinmun (Workers' Party Newspaper), North Korea's main paper, is a common channel through which propaganda is dispersed. Through a North Korean contact, I once obtained 30 copies of the paper. Since it was such a rarity, I distributed copies as gifts to family, friends, and organizations. I gave a copy to two of my cousins who live in Seoul, South Korea. One cousin, Hee-Su, commented on the strange language the paper used. Even though she was a fluent Korean speaker, the writing was foreign to her. Another cousin, In-Ho, who had just completed his mandatory military service, was thankful to get his hands on such a rare item and warned me, "Be careful carrying this around. If any police caught you reading this paper, they would harass you asking how you got this"

When visiting North Korea, at every turn you will find some sort of propaganda posted on the streets. ~~One of our Korean-Chinese staff members saw the following signs when visiting Chongjin:~~ "Hail Great Kim Il Sung!"; "If the Communist party decides it, we will do it"; "Let's live our own way"; "Let's beat America with a big iron stick" He said that people in the streets greeted him saying "We live very happy lives and we live in the bosom of our warm leader."

There is also propaganda at the borders of the country made out of huge white blocks reminiscent of the Hollywood sign in the Hollywood Hills. Erected on stands, each character is nine meters high and six meters wide. Including the height of the stand, each character stands twelve meters high. In a thirty-minute drive along the border you will see multiple signs that make pronouncements such as "Hail to the Great Sun of the 21st century. General Kim Jong Il!"

The regime uses legends for brainwashing too. In Hoeryung, the hometown of Kim Jong Il's mother, Kim Jong Suk, there is a sign that reads, "Let's learn from our fellow heroine Kim Jong Suk and how she protested against Japan" She died at 32 years of age and ever since has been a national war hero. One of our Korean-Chinese staff members told of a tour guide in Chongjin telling a tour group the following story:

Shortly after winning our independence from Japan, Kim Jong Suk came to this spot when she was 30 years old, two years before she died. All the people gathered and said, "We have heard that you are a good shot. Will you please demonstrate for us?" Do you see that big memorial stone over there? If you take a close look you will see a hole in the rock made from a bullet. Kim Jong Suk once came to this spot when she was 30 years old and shot five bullets at that stone. There is only one bullet mark because the first one hit the stone and the other four bullets hit the same exact spot.

At that point, our staff member shouted, "I think it's because she only hit the rock once and missed the other four shots" The group laughed, but the tour guide glared at him.

In March 2007, a group of Chinese college students traveled to Chongjin on a one-week vacation. While there, they witnessed firsthand second-year North Korean college students in class. The students were in army clothes standing at attention in a straight line. The teacher shouted, "Let's learn from Kim Jong Suk and how she fought against Japan even though she was poor and had nothing. Let's fight against America in the same way."

The North Korean press, as a standard part of its operations, reports legends about Kim Jong Il. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the main news agency in North Korea, once claimed "Mysterious natural phenomena were witnessed on September 28. When ... Secretary Kim Jong Il in his car arrived at the entrance to the [military] unit, the fog cleared off and the sun shone bright in the blue sky. Two apricot trees on either side of the road to the unit had 28 and 26 blossoms respectively. Seeing the mysterious natural phenomena, the unit servicemen said that Secretary Kim Jong Il is the famous general produced by heaven"<sup>5</sup>

This is the type of news and information that North Koreans are limited to receiving. The same holds true for literature. Author Michael Breen put it well when he said, "So far, no North Korean has been short-listed for the Nobel Prize for literature"<sup>6</sup>

Every village in North Korea has a white tower that says, "Father Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader"

lives with us forever." After Kim Il Sung died in 1994, they built these white towers as a reminder that he is always present with them in spirit. Many have commented that because Kim Il Sung was introduced to Christianity at an early age, much of the propaganda is taken from Christian ideas and biblical teaching. There are songs in North Korea that sound very similar to Christian hymns. One of our local staff members who pastors a house church in China commented, "If you took some North Korean songs and replaced Kim Il Sung with God or Jesus it would sound exactly like a Christian hymn. They even have a creed that is almost identical to the Apostles' Creed"

Examples of North Korean propaganda are abundant and in some cases quite comical. In one of our drives along the China-North Korea border, we were having a conversation about North Korean propaganda, and our U.S. Director of Operations said, "Hey, Mike, did you ever hear the story about how Kim Jong Il played 18 holes of golf and scored an 18?" I had not heard that story and asked one of our Korean-Chinese staff members, who is very knowledgeable about North Korea, if he had ever heard it. He said no, then added:

But I do know that North Koreans don't use the English word golf. There is an aversion to using English words over there. Their way of thinking is, "Why should we use English words? Why should we use Korean words." So they called golf "putting a ball into 18 holes" and eventually shortened it to "18 holes" because it was too hard to say.

As ridiculous as this may sound, it shows how North Koreans are educated. But perhaps what's most amazing is not that the leadership teaches these kinds of stories but that the people actually believe them.

The regime depends heavily on what it calls *hakseup* to successfully brainwash the people. The word simply means "education" One South Korean friend described it as a "learning session" When I asked an educated North Korean man what *hakseup* means, he defined it in English as an "ideology session" Every citizen is required to regularly attend *hakseup*, usually on Tuesdays. When I asked what went on in these meetings, he explained, "We are required to regularly meet in small groups to memorize and to write a number of things" "What kinds of things?" "We have to copy things such as Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il's speeches or recite them until we have them memorized," he said. "We also often have to memorize North Korean literature and historical accounts of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il" Then he whispered, "It's so boring. I usually fall asleep."

Like football towns that close shop when their team is playing, North Koreans close shop when *hakseup* is in session. I once called a tourism company in North Korea on a Tuesday several times throughout the day, only to receive no answer. I later learned that they weren't answering the phone because they were having their *hakseup* sessions. Every week on Tuesday, businesses and the market are shut down so people can attend these meetings.

When North Korean government employees are sent abroad, they continue to attend *hakseup* meetings, even more frequently. Despite their increased attendance, the regime has a strict policy that no North Korean can stay overseas for more than three years. They are required to return to Pyongyang for re-education after their three-year term is completed. In some cases, I have seen North Korean employees sent back to Pyongyang early if their colleagues suspect that they are weakening ideologically.

In addition to *hakseup*, women are required to attend a meeting called "Ten-day Life Evaluation"

confess to their wrongdoings. One participant told me, "We have to confess things such as the house being messy, not taking care of our kids well, not packing lunch for our husband" Younger people are required to attend a similar meeting called "Weekend Life Evaluation." One young woman commented, "What kind of wrong can we do? We just stay at home to cook and clean."

The following New York Times article about the way some North Koreans responded when their houses were on fire illustrates just how effective government indoctrination has been:

To hear North Korea's state media tell it, in the midst of an inferno of exploding railcars and dying children, several heroic women made the ultimate sacrifice, running into blazing buildings in frantic attempts to save treasured portraits of Kim Jong Il and his dead father, Kim Il Sung. "Many people of the county evacuated portraits before searching after their family members or saving their household goods," the Korean Central News Agency wrote approvingly from Ryongchon, the railroad town where a huge explosion killed at least 161 people and injured 1,300 last week. "They were buried under the collapsing buildings to die a heroic death when they were trying to come out with portraits of President Kim Il Sung and Dear Leader Kim Jong Il." North Korea, where the state personality cult is stronger than in Mao's China or Stalin's Russia, citizens need no reminder that their leaders are more important than their own children.'

Mrs. Park, a 32-year-old North Korean, worked for the army near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) at the heavily guarded border between the two Koreas. She recalls the day she was ordered to pick up prodemocracy literature being flown in from South Korea by balloons. Mrs. Park and four other soldiers were assigned the task of collecting the literature before anyone could read it. During her shift, she found four of those balloons and disposed of them:

I remember the balloons floating in with a colored plastic bag tied to the bottom of them. At the time, I didn't know what was in the bags, but later I learned that they contained prodemocracy literature and pictures illustrating what life was like in South Korea. We were ordered to collect the balloons before civilians could see it . . . We didn't pick up the literature with our hands but picked it up using a stick.

"Why?" I inquired. "We were taught that our hands would rot if we touched anything from South Korea," she replied. Asked if she believed that at the time, she said yes.

## **THE NORTH KOREAN WORLDVIEW**

One time, I played the name game with a group of North Korean refugees. "When you were in North Korea, did you know who Michael Jordan was?" "No." "Did you know Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan?" "No" (I have been to remote villages in the mountains of Ethiopia where people knew of Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan.) "Did you know who Elvis was?" "No" "Did you ever hear of Michael Jackson?" One teenage boy's face lit up: "I know Michael Jackson!" He stood up, smiled, and flashed a dance move. We all laughed. Surprised, I asked, "While you were in North Korea, you knew who Michael Jackson was?" "No, I only heard of Michael Jackson after coming to China"

After asking more questions, I learned that the only famous people they knew outside their country were high-level government officials from the United States because they were demonized so often. There is a word in Korean, gangpae, which means "gangster." The North Korean media refer to George W. Bush, Colin Powell, and Donald Rumsfeld as gangpae. The refugees were also familiar with some



- [download online \*Making Sense of Japanese Grammar: A Clear Guide Through Common Problems\*](#)
- [read online \*The Mystery on Cobbett's Island\* \(Trixie Belden, Book 13\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [Reading Freud: A Chronological Exploration of Freud's Writings online](#)
- [Advances in Understanding Strategic Behaviour: Game Theory, Experiments and Bounded Rationality pdf](#)
- [click \*Å½iÅ¾ek and the Media\* \(Theory and Media\)](#)
  
- <http://www.1973vision.com/?library/Making-Sense-of-Japanese-Grammar--A-Clear-Guide-Through-Common-Problems.pdf>
- <http://schrolf.de/books/The-Facebook-Marketing-Book.pdf>
- <http://dadhoc.com/lib/Reading-Freud--A-Chronological-Exploration-of-Freud-s-Writings.pdf>
- <http://aseasonedman.com/ebooks/Working-with-the-Enemy--How-to-Survive-and-Thrive-with-Really-Difficult-People.pdf>
- <http://flog.co.id/library/Moscow-Circles.pdf>