

AN INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMED

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Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee—A Look Inside North Korea*
(New York: Atria, 2014)

Jang Jin-sung's *Dear Leader* is the real-life account of a high-ranking member of the Korean Workers' Party forced to defect from North Korea, exchanging a life of privilege in Pyongyang for desperation in China. Jang's story, however, is more than a tale of survival—it is an indictment of the North Korean political system, a narrative about losing faith and coming to terms with the hypocrisy of a government one was supposed to love unquestioningly. In that account, the author describes experiences that not only brought him face-to-face with Kim Jong Il, but also top-secret documents on the history of the Dear Leader's rise to power. Kim Jong Il, Jang argues, gained complete control of the North Korean government in the early 1980s by purging enemies and manipulating Kim Il Sung as a figure-head. These arguments—interwoven with the story of Jang's struggle for survival after defecting—are as fascinating as they are often startling.

But *Dear Leader* is most valuable not as an insider's account of the North Korean government but as the story of one individual transformed by that system. This book, first and foremost, is a narrative of woe, anger, and enduring loss—the account of a man that not only hates the North Korean state, but despises the actions it forced him to take. Jang's story is the tortured tale of what happens when an individual realizes that everything he once thought was real is a tragic farce.

Dear Leader stands out prominently from a burgeoning defector literature in English. Unlike Kang's Chol-hwan's *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, Shin Dong-hyuk's *Escape from Camp 14*, or Kang Hyok's *This is Paradise! My North Korean Childhood*, this book is the rare chronicle of a person from the very top of the North Korean power structure.¹ Rivalled only by the ac-

1 Kang Chol-Hwan and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Blaine Harden, *Escape From Camp 14: One Man's Remark-*

counts of the late Hwang Jang-yop—detailed in *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-il*—Jang’s story describes how a high-ranking member of the Korean Workers’ Party managed to defect when his life was threatened.²

A Question of Faith

That narrative begins with Jang meeting Kim Jong Il in 1999—an experience that left the author deeply shaken. Whisked away in the middle of the night alongside a small number of party elites, Jang expected to meet a god-like figure; instead, he found himself “confronted by an old man who looks like nothing like the familiar image of the People’s Leader.” (xvii) At that extravagant dinner party, complete with flaming ice cream and mood lighting for each course, Jang watched with horror as the “Dear Leader” used crass language towards his obsequious subordinates. “For the first time in my life,” Jang recalls of that dinner, “loyal obedience makes me cringe.” (xxii)

It was Jang’s fidelity, however, that had earned him the rare opportunity to dine with “the General” in the first place. At just the age of 27, he had received an appointment to work in the DPRK’s United Front Department (UFD), a top-secret division of the Workers’ Party tasked with policy-making and espionage. The author worked as a poet in the UFD’s literature section—Office 101 (no 1984 pun-intended)—tasked with studying materials from the ROK to “inhabit South Korea’s collective psyche so as to undermine and triumph over it.” (9) In that role, Jang authored a poem on “Seongun Korea” that gained him widespread acclaim and a seat at the dinner table alongside Kim Jong Il. If that latter experience disturbed Jang, it also classed him as one of the “Admitted”—a citizen outside the reach of security services without the permission of Kim Jong Il. “I was loyal and fearless,” the author recalled of his standing in society thereafter. (3)

The internal contradictions of North Korean life rendered that contentment short-lived. After the UFD tasked the author with writing a new poem dedicated to Kim Il Sung, Jang returned to his hometown of Sariweon, some 40 miles south of Pyongyang. The place he found, ravaged by the ghoulis realities of the “Arduous March,” was barely recognizable. Starving and exhausted townspeople marveled at him everywhere he went—“We heard you

able Odyssey From North Korea to Freedom in the West (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Kang Hyok and Philippe Grangereau, *This is Paradise: My North Korean Childhood* (London: Abacus, 2007).

2 John H. Cha and K.J. Sohn, *Exit Emperor Kim Jong-il: Notes from His Former Mentor* (Bloomington, IN: Abbott Press, 2012).

had dinner with the General! What kind of porridge does he like to eat?" a jaundiced neighbor asked Jang; "Oh, you know the song, 'The Rice Balls of the General'?" the author replied, "Just like in that song, he shared a rice ball with us." Jang, privileged and well fed, became a reluctant participant in a morally repugnant charade.

Thereafter, Jang couldn't write praise for the leadership without envisioning the misery of Sariweon. In private, he wrote poetry expressing his anger towards the regime and shared his frustration with a trusted friend, Hwang Young-min. Eventually, Jang lent that friend a South Korean book from the UFD—an action punishable by death. When Hwang knocked on his door late on January 10, 2004, explaining that he had left the book on the Pyeongyang Metro, the two men realized that authorities would trace it back to them. They had no choice but to defect to China or face execution.

The next morning, Jang left his parents' home for the last time, wearing sunglasses to hide his tears and remaining silent about his impending defection. (This, he thought, would prevent them from having to lie to interrogators after his escape.) "I knew that the Workers' Party could take away my right to life," the author writes with rage of that moment, "but it had also taken away my right to say good-bye to my family." Just as the DPRK had made Jang write on its behalf, it also forced him to turn his back on his own family without a word of regret.

Throughout Jang and Hwang's desperate efforts to reach the South Korean embassy in Beijing thereafter, the author finds himself tormented by new questions about the DPRK. How had China achieved so much economic success and North Korea remained so impoverished? How could the North Korean government let human traffickers sell North Korean women as "pigs" in Manchuria? The author focuses his anger on the "Dear Leader," writing: "I felt disgust for Kim Jong-il, who didn't seem to be humiliated at all by what he had reduced his nation's women to, or to care enough to intervene." (165) The man Jang had encouraged others to worship was guilty of so much more than he had ever realized.

The Secrets Are Too Much

It is in this regard that the author explains how his work in the UFD contributed to his mounting resentment of Kim Jong Il before his defection. Selected in 1999 to participate in writing the *Annals of the Kim Dynasty*, an official history of Kim Il Sung's rule, Jang examined top-secret documents that revealed the "Dear Leader" had organized against his father's support-

ers throughout the 1970s, building his own faction in the “Organization and Guidance Department” of the Workers’ Party (an all-powerful entity, the author contends, that still dominates the DPRK today). By 1982, Jang argues, Kim Jong Il had silently seized power, leaving his father a weak figurehead.

These discoveries, the author states, deeply disquieted him. “I became terrified by the knowledge,” he writes, “that the Dear Leader was neither compassionate nor divine, and had acquired his power by acts of terror, betrayal, and revenge.” (135) Jang’s position—promoting a government he had begun to loathe—became unbearable. “I want out,” he told a trusted co-worker of his work for the UFD. “The secrets are too much for me to bear. I don’t think I can ever have a free conscience again, knowing the truths behind the lies.” (136) “Don’t be stupid,” Jang’s friend replied, “...keep it all shut inside you...” That is largely what Jang did until his defection in 2004.

In the present, Jang’s *Dear Leader* is an effort to clear his conscience—to exercise the residue of anger and guilt that remain with him from his life in North Korea. If the story of his desperate efforts to avoid arrest in China and attain freedom in South Korea ultimately prove successful, it’s clear that the burden of the author’s salvation still looms large. So many defectors—Jang understands all too well—were not as fortunate as him. Chinese authorities captured his friend, Hwang Young-min, who then threw himself off a cliff to avoid deportation to North Korea. Countless other defectors have found themselves held as slaves by Chinese flesh traders or tortured in North Korean labor camps.

This reality weighs heavily on the author, and he has thus used his freedom to challenge the tyranny of the North Korean regime in *Dear Leader*. His earlier book of poetry, *Nae Ttaleul Baek Wone Bapnida (I Sell My Daughter for 100 Won)*³, recounts the grim realities of the “Arduous March,” and his new publication, *New Focus International*⁴, provides in depth analysis of political and economic developments in North Korea. However, the author’s newest work is his most powerful contribution to the plight of the North Korean people to date. That story shares his experiences with a larger audience beyond South Korea and is a reminder that the North Korean people are the strongest force north of the Korean DMZ. As they learn more about the crimes of their government, they, too, will struggle with the same emo-

3 Jin Seong Jang, *Nae Ttaleul Baek Wone Bapnida* (Seoul: Jogamjae, 2008); available in English by: Sun Young Soon (trans.) and Jang Jin-sung, *Selling My Daughter for 100 won* (Tokyo: Banseisha, 2009).

4 See: *New Focus International: Authentic North Korea News, Analysis and Features*, (www.newfocusintl.com).

tions of the author and find themselves compelled to take greater risks for the sake of change and freedom. As Jang Jin-sung states in closing: "We must place our faith in the people of North Korea, not in the system that imprisons them." (317) We would be well advised to heed that advice. **Y**