

Book Review

The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag

By Kang Chol-Hwan and Pierre Rigoulot

Kang Chol-Hwan came from one of the many Korean families who moved to North Korea from Japan in the mid 20th century. Throughout the 1950s there was a large contingent of Koreans living in Japan who had fled to the island to escape the horrors of the Korean war. These refugees had a good life in Japan. Many of them held lucrative jobs, and they were surrounded by friends and family who had also immigrated to the island. Yet many of these Koreans decided to return home to start a life for themselves in the communist North.

These Korean refugees in Japan had been listening with eagerness to news of the revolutionary struggle occurring back in the north of their homeland. They heard how the “people’s struggle” had culminated in the establishment of The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea under the faithful leadership of Kim Il-sung.

Reports continued to flood into Japan through the communist organizations about what a paradise North Korea was becoming. While there were some dissenting voices, warning that North Korea was far from being a communist utopia, the pro-North Korean political groups in Japan dismissed these warnings as anti-communist propaganda.

Thus it was that throughout the late 50s, thousands of Korean families living in Japan decided to immigrate back to their homeland. Leaving behind friends, family and wealth, tens of thousands took the journey, almost ecstatic to be part of Kim Il-sung’s “Paradise on Earth.”

Those who were left behind in Japan waited anxiously to receive news from their family and friends. Often they were met with only silence, or else letters with an unclear meaning. Assuming this must mean things were fine, many other Koreans sailed over.

What the returning Koreans stepped ashore, what they found was not a communist paradise but a prison. Some new arrivals who were loyal to communism were arrested immediately upon arrival, never understanding why and spending the little that remained of their lives in utter confusion and despair. Most were allowed to integrate into North Korean society (little better than a prison itself), but only after the wealth they had brought over from Japan had been systematically confiscated.

Kang Chol-Hwan, author of *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, was born into a family whose grandparents were among these immigrants. When Kang’s grandparents’ stepped ashore on North Korean soil, one of his uncles recalled seeing several Koreans who had immigrated a few weeks earlier come up to some of the immigrants and say, “What happened? We sent our friends and family letters warning people not to come! Why didn’t your family listen?” The reality is that their letters had never been allowed to reach Japan.

After listening to this ominous exchange, Kang's uncle looked around him. "It was like the city was dead – the strangest atmosphere" he recalled. "The people all looked so shabby and aimless in their wandering. There was a feeling of deep sadness in the air, and no movement betrayed the slightest hint of spontaneity."

By the time Kang's grandparents realized their mistake, it was too late. They would never be allowed to go back to Japan, and to even ask to move back would be looked upon as a capital offence.

Kang's parents and grandparents actually had it good. They were allowed to live in the capital city, Pyongyang, and because they had brought over so much wealth, they were favoured by the party leaders. Kang's grandfather was even able to keep a Volvo he had brought over from Japan, in which he took his children and grandchildren on drives in the country. (Every outing had to be authorized, usually requiring a hansom bribe to a party bureaucrat).

Moreover, because his grandfather worked in food distribution, there was always plenty to eat. Since Kang had never experienced his family's other life in Japan (his father married in 1967, after the family had already come over) he had nothing with which to compare and led a genuinely happy childhood, or as happy as one can realistically expect to be in this totalitarian state.

The trouble began in 1977 when Kang was nine and his grandfather simply disappeared. No one was ever told what he had done, but it was supposed that someone must have reported him for being disloyal. In North Korea there are never any trials, and the mere suspicion that a person is disloyal to the communist party can be enough to send him and his entire family to a labour camp.

Not long after this, agents showed up at the family's house and abruptly informed the household that they were being "transferred." No explanations were given, but the hardest part about it for Kang was that his mother couldn't accompany them. Since she was descended from a 'heroic family' she was not allowed to join her children even though she repeatedly begged to do so.

Nine-year old Kang, along with his seven-year old sister Mi-ho, his father, grandmother, uncle and aunt, were taken to a camp in Yodok in the South-Hamkyung Province. For the next ten years they remained prisoners, without ever being told what had happened to warrant this treatment.

As soon as Kang arrived, the other children in the camp told him how to survive. The greatest killer at the camp was starvation, since their meagre corn rations kept all inmates in a permanent state of semi-starvation. Kang was told that it was almost impossible to survive if one did not steal food methodically, systematically and constantly. The key was never to get caught.

During the first few months Kang did nearly die of malnutrition. However, he gradually found ways to supplement his diet with corn and soybeans stolen from the guard's gardens, in addition to animals caught in the fields such as frogs, salamanders, various insects and an occasional snake. He also kept himself alive by catching and eating rats.

Though hunger was constant, piercing, draining and debilitating, the prisoners were expected to work long hours of labour. The work regime would tax a person under normal conditions but was absolute agony for those who were starving and allowed only minimal sleep each night. Even so, the incentive to work was almost overwhelming, since food distribution was directly linked to how much work one accomplished.

Up until he turned 15, Kang only worked in the afternoon, spending the morning with the other children in the camp's school. When they weren't being abused by their 'teachers', lessons involved little more than memorizing and repeating the sayings of their Dear Leader.

A teacher would use anything as a pretext to beat – and sometimes even kill – the students under their charge. “No trifle was too small to serve as a pretext for a beating – of a child or an adult” Kang wrote. He told of one time a boy was beaten by a teacher until he was unconscious. Another student was dumped into a septic tank where no one was allowed to assist help to climb out, an event that contributed to his death a few days later.

School punishments also included forcing students to crawl on all fours chanting “I’m a dog, I’m a dog,” thrashings, being made to stand naked in the courtyard all day, and sleep deprivation. The sleep deprivation was achieved by making students as young as ten chop wood all night, or dig ditches, fill them up with rocks, then dig new ditches and fill them up with the dirt from the first ditch, and so on.

Kang was able to dodge most of the thrashings in addition to avoiding the camp's most dangerous work details, but many of the other children were not so lucky. Kang had friends who died hideous deaths working in the mine. Next to malnutrition, the mine was the most common cause of death.

One of the most horrendous things for Kang was being forced to witness regular public hangings. When a victim was finally dead, all the prisoners were required to throw stones at the hanging corpse.

The combination of insufficient sleep, malnutrition and overwork meant that madness was common. Everyone lived in constant terror of one of their family members going mad, because if the mad person said anything against the “Dear Leader”, the family would pay with their lives.

Throughout it all, the threat of disease was constant, especially flea-borne diseases like scabies and typhus. This is not surprising given the extremely unsanitary conditions of the camp (there were only seven outhouses for a village of two to three thousand).

Yodok also contained some large isolated work sites where prisoners would work on building missiles or other sophisticated munitions and classified projects. At these work details the prisoners were worked so hard that they typically died within a few months of being sent there. “The system constitutes an important source of savings for the state” Kang explained. “...not only did it conserve the executioners’ bullets, it furnishes from a labor force that demanded no salary and very little food.”

Next to being sentenced to death in one of these work details, the worst torture at Yodok was the “sweatbox” where a prisoner is made to crouch on his or her knees with their hands on their thighs, unable to move for a period that can last as long as three months, in complete darkness the entire time. With hardly anything to eat, the person sent to the sweatbox can only survive by devouring insects that come into arm's reach. However, if the person is caught moving, he or she will either be beaten or forced to crouch face down over the septic

pit for half an hour. Those who emerge from the sweatbox alive live the rest of their lives a ruined human being.

The horrors that Kang describes are mindboggling, all the more so when we consider that Yodok was mild compared to North Korea's more severe death camps. Around 30% of the population at Yodok were still considered 'redeemable', which means that they were theoretically being trained for release back into society. In practice very few were released and most died of starvation before their sentences were complete. The despair felt by Yodok's population of 'irredeemables' was overwhelming. Of the 'irredeemables' Kang wrote, "They knew they were never leaving the camp. No matter how long their hearts continued to pump, or their lungs to breathe, they would never again live as citizens. Their children, too, would suffer this fate."

Very occasionally a prisoner would get transferred to Yodok from other camps and would surprise the inmates by describing Yodok as a virtual paradise. Kang wrote,

"I feel almost guilty complaining publicly about the life I led at Yodok. Yes, guilty, for Yodok is by no means the toughest camp in North Korea. Far worse exist, and they are shrouded in such secrecy that for a long time it was impossible to talk about them with any precision. ...the inmates of the other hard labor camps were members of landholding families, capitalists, US or South Korean agents, Christians, or members of purged Party circles deemed noxious to the state."

Once he escaped to South Korea, Kang heard some of the reports from guards who had escaped from some of these more severe camps. One former camp guard told of pregnant women being flogged, of girls having their breasts cut off or of being raped with a spade handle until dead.

Since Kang and his family were classed among the 'redeemables', after ten years they were released, but only after being given strict instructions not to talk to anyone about the camp in a way that might portray their experiences in a negative light.

Kang describes his attempts to re-integrate into North Korean society, and how eventually he and some friends began secretly tuning into South Korean radio. This not only enabled them to understand their country in a larger context, but introduced them to the gospel. He wrote:

"We liked listening to the Christian programs on the Korean Broadcasting System. The message of love and respect for one's fellow man was sweet as honey to us. It was so different from what we were used to hearing."

The radio programs also gave Kang and his friends the categories they needed to express their dissatisfaction, and to pinpoint exactly what was wrong with their regime.

"Every program, each new discovery, helped us tear a little freer from the enveloping web of deception. Knowledge that there was a counterpoint to official reality was already a kind of escape, one that could exhilarate as well as confuse. It is difficult to explain, for example, the emotions we felt on hearing it demonstrated, proof positive, that the North had actually started the Korean War, not the American imperialists, as we had always been told....The programs furnished us with an overview of the system as a whole: its origins, the reasons behind its current difficulties, the absurdity of its official boasting of self-sufficiency in light of its pleading for international aid."

When Kang began to suspect that his illegal radio activity had been discovered, he had no choice but to flee the nation. Fortunately, he had developed connections that enabled him to travel to the border, where he escaped into China. From China he eventually made his way to South Korea.

Once settled in South Korea, a Security Agency bureaucrat introduced him to the Protestant church he still attends and where he received the sacrament of baptism. "Seoul's Christian community offered me enormous material and emotional support," Kang reflected.

Using the network of Christian groups in South Korea, Kang has been working ever since to help other renegades. He writes about his involvement encouraging South Korea, as well as the international community, to do more to help those who escape from the North.

His greatest struggle is the pain he still feels for those he had to leave behind, especially his dear sister Mi-ho, who had to face the famine of the 90s and may not still be alive.

Kang Chol-Hwan is only one in between 150,000 and 200,000 incarcerated in the camps. Most never make it out alive, let alone escape to tell their story