

True Believers: Conversations with North Koreans

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Article type: Viewpoint

Purpose—To argue that North Korean elites are “true believers” in the Kim personality cult. To present the possibilities for and limitations on using travel to North Korea as a research tool for North Korean scholars.

Design/methodology/approach—I used a tourist trip to North Korea as an opportunity to probe and discuss sensitive subjects with my North Korean guides. I tried to gauge their level of belief in the regime’s propaganda.

Findings—It is likely that many North Korean elites are “true believers” in the Kim regime, even though they may entertain doubts about some of its methods.

Practical implications—The underlying stability of North Korea may be stronger than most would suspect or hope.

Originality/value—This essay makes use of unconventional research methods and primary sources. Hopefully it will encourage other scholars to consider the research potentials of traveling to North Korea.

Keywords: North Korean elites, North Korean ideology,
North Korean society and politics, ROK–DPRK relations,
U.S.–DPRK relations

Introduction

First-time visitors to South Korea, especially if they arrive at night, cannot miss the sea of red and white neon crosses perched atop the multi-story commercial buildings that populate the urban landscape. A cross on such a building means that somewhere inside, likely smashed between an English language academy and an Internet

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café is a small but dynamic Christian church. Korean Christianity is notable for its lack of nominal Christians. South Korean Christians are “true believers,” going to church several times a week, arriving in the pre-dawn hours for morning prayer (*saebyeokgido*), and attending home Bible studies. On the surface, the dynamism of Christianity (and other religions) appears to be just another point of contrast between South Koreans and their northern kin, but perhaps “true believers” of a different sort in North Korea are more numerous than one might expect, or hope.

After a recent trip to North Korea, I concluded that the few elite North Koreans I was exposed to were indeed, “true believers.”¹ They are true believers in a system that to outsiders appears so brittle it could crumble at any moment, but to them best explains the world around them. Like people everywhere, North Koreans are trying to make sense of their environment, but they are denied the information necessary to arrive at independent conclusions or to challenge the narrative of the ruling regime. Being aware of the faith of these “true believers” is essential to understand the nature of the bonds that hold North Korea together; to explain how they have successfully executed two successions that many experts predicted would topple the regime, and to appreciate the reason why there is no obvious solution to the problems that stem from the division of the Korean peninsula.

Traveling to North Korea was a difficult decision. Apart from the cost, it raised some moral questions. The hard currency brought in by the small tourism industry is a source of direct support for the Kim regime. I did not want to travel there unless I could learn something valuable. I needed a plan and gradually devised one; instead of going to North Korea with the idea of attempting to break away from my minders to see the “real” North Korea, I would make my minders the subject of my research. Rather than trying to find the hidden North Korea, I would focus on the visible North Korea, and the North Koreans the regime wanted me to see.

Kim Il-sung Mausoleum: A Fitting Introduction

To understand the faith of North Koreans, it is first necessary to understand the cult of the Kims. Among the personality cults of the 20th century, the Kims’ stands out for its longevity and virility. There has never been a Korean parallel to “de-Stalinization,” or even a modest reevaluation that Kim Il-sung was “70 percent right and 30 percent wrong,” as Deng Xiaoping famously said of Mao Zedong. Although Kim Il-sung ruled North Korea since the 1940s his personality cult was not founded until the early 1970s, just as the North Korean economy was beginning to slip into terminal decline.² The personality cult was a way to cultivate loyalty and concentrate power at the very top while North Korea was transitioning from a single-party Communist state to a personal dictatorship. From its inception it appears Kim Il-sung’s son, Kim Jong-il, managed and developed the cult with an eye toward making it the cornerstone of the Kim family’s dynastic rule.³ Since his death in 1994 Kim Il-sung has remained the “eternal president.” My minders never once mentioned the death of Kim Il-sung, only his “demise.”

The essence of the Kim cult is best understood by a visit to Kim Il-sung's mausoleum on the outskirts of Pyongyang. Located at the end of a kilometer-long boulevard visitors are struck by its sheer size. In front of the mausoleum is a square just a bit smaller than Tiananmen in Beijing, but the complex itself dwarfs the mausoleums of Mao and Stalin. We were unloaded at a special pavilion across a moat from the mausoleum. Here the ceremonies began. The minders assembled us into ranks four abreast and told us to "move as one" while in the mausoleum. Rather than walk across the formidable square to the main entrance we were ushered into an underground processing facility; here we were hit with a high-pressure blast of air—the first of three we would receive—to make sure we were as clean as possible. The air in the mausoleum was sterile and the atmosphere reverential. There was no dirt or dust, and no sound besides the hum of the ventilation system. Before we reached the security checkpoint we received another blast of air as we stood on a moving walkway equipped with brushes to clean the bottom of our shoes. No stray dirt of ours would defile the final resting place of Kim Il-sung.

We were not alone in the mausoleum. Groups of North Koreans in their finest clothes—women in colorful *hanboks* and men in drab green "general" suits—silently accompanied us. Many of these Koreans were not members of the elite. They were darker skinned, weather-beaten, hunched over, and had the look of the ancient farmers that you can still see in South Korea if you venture into rural areas. I wondered if they were not from the less fortunate parts of the country, and had been brought to Pyongyang to be reminded of the regime's greatness. Most of them looked impressed and even moved as the walkways carried them towards the Great Leader. More than a few had tears in their eyes. This was likely a once in a lifetime chance for them.

We passed through room after room displaying Kim's relics: his black Mercedes, immaculately clean and elevated on a marble pedestal, his personal train car similarly embalmed, the "awards" and "honorary degrees" he had received from Kensington University and other "notable" institutions.

A final blast of air removed any lingering impurities as we walked into the "holy of holies": the room where the Great Leader lay. Four abreast, we silently walked clockwise around Kim and bowed at each compass point. I tried to keep my bows modest and respectful rather than deep and reverential. The room was an immense cavern of dark marble lit from the ceiling with soft red lights. Kim lay in the center under a glass sarcophagus, his head on a pillow and the flag of North Korea draped over his body. Unlike Mao in Beijing, Kim Il-sung looked very dead, dead enough that it was easy to believe it was really him and not just a wax mockup as some have suspected occupies Mao's sarcophagus. The large goiter still visible on the back of his neck added authenticity. Seeing him there—clearly dead and clearly human—forced the question of how such extravagance could be justified in a state that cannot meet the basic needs of its people. However, the faces of the North Koreans in the mausoleum told us that they were not there to see the human remains of a deeply flawed man, but to see the cornerstone of their cult. Over the next few days I would become convinced that this cult was not only maintained by North Korea's well-known use of oppression, but also by no small measure of faith.

Road to Wonsan

The road from Pyongyang to the eastern port city of Wonsan was rough. It was over 200 kilometers of what appeared to be concrete slabs. Time had taken its toll on the road, forcing some of the slabs up and some down, making for a constant staccato sound, and an uncomfortable ride. This was the only road between Pyongyang and Wonsan and one of the few paved roads in North Korea. During the five-hour drive we never passed another town, only the occasional small farming communities set back off the road. I cannot remember even seeing another paved road. As we went further from Pyongyang the trees began to thin out, then nearly disappeared altogether, until we reached the rugged and remote Ahobiryong Mountains. I assumed that the trees there were either protected or too remote to be cut down for fuel.

This ride was my first chance to fulfill the purpose that had brought me to North Korea: to engage my North Korean minders. My first conversation was with Mr. Kim. It was very one-sided. After giving me his basic biography, he did not request one from me, but rather launched into a battery of oddly specific questions about my life in South Korea. How many South Korean high school graduates went to college? Were schools sex segregated? How many students did I have? Were they well behaved? What did they eat? When I explained that South Koreans could eat meat everyday if they wanted, he only nodded his head—something he already knew. For the most part the Kim regime no longer tries to maintain the fiction that life in the North is materially better than in the South. Most elite North Koreans know the South has become rich in the last two decades, but they console themselves with the belief that the South has only accomplished this by being a colony of the United States. North Korea may be poor, but at least the country is “independent.” After all, one translation of *juche*, the North Korean national philosophy, is “self-reliance.”

“May I see your iPod?” Mr. Kim asked abruptly.

I was worried. I never told him I had one. Had he seen me using its Korean-English dictionary? Was he going to confiscate it? To my relief he just wanted to play with it. Like the border guard the day before, he was familiar with iPods. He browsed through my apps with no trouble. What interested him most was the music. He searched diligently from top to bottom and then asked, “Would you have any Backstreet Boys or Celine Dion?” When I told him “no” he looked a little disappointed and told me they were his favorites.

Still chuckling to myself about Mr. Kim’s musical tastes, I nervously moved into more politically sensitive topics. I started with the *Cheonan*, the South Korean battleship, allegedly sunk by a North Korean torpedo in March 2010, bringing tensions between the two Koreas to their highest level in years (only to be superseded in November 2010 by the Yeonpyong shelling). I had spent hours discussing the *Cheonan* with South Korean friends and was surprised to learn that few of them believed the North was responsible for the attack. Likewise Mr. Kim was willing to entertain any of the scenarios that led to the *Cheonan*’s sinking, except the idea of a North Korean attack. When I mentioned the Korean script on the torpedo found

near the wreckage he responded with a metaphor about no robber being so stupid as to write his name in a house he has just robbed. I suggested that perhaps an over-eager commander might have attacked on his own authority. “Not a chance,” Mr. Kim assured me. I did not understand the way things worked in North Korea.

“Perhaps the American government and South Korean President Lee Myong-Bak sank the ship, so they can have an excuse to invade our country,” Mr. Kim suggested.

“Do you think the South Korean government would be involved in a conspiracy that would kill over one hundred of their own sailors?”

“If the Americans told them to, yes. They will do anything the Americans say. Isn’t it strange that none of the officers on the *Cheonan* died? They all escaped and only the common sailors died. Lee Myong-Bak does not care at all about the common people. He obeys the Americans.”

Now it was Mr. Kim’s turn to ask a political question.

“Why doesn’t the United States leave the South? The Soviets and Chinese forces left our country decades ago. Why can’t the Korean Peninsula be free of foreign soldiers?”

I cautiously explained that most Americans could care less about either Korea, but South Korean and American fears of a North Korean attack keep them there. At this he laughed as if I had just suggested the most absurd thing.

“How can they be afraid of us?” he asked with seemingly complete sincerity. “We have never done anything to them.” There was a short pause during which Mr. Kim probably read my expression and anticipated my next question. “It was the South that started the war.”

“You mean the Korean War?”

“Of course. They started it,” he said with conviction.

I had expected to hear an “alternative” version of the Korean War in North Korea, one in which the issue of who exactly started the war would be obscured. I had not expected a complete, categorical denial. Later, I came to realize how important this blanket denial of responsibility was to the North Korean identity. It allows them to believe they have been innocent victims of aggression for their entire history, from the time of the Japanese annexation, through the Korean War, and all the way to the *Cheonan* incident. This history of victimization is then used to justify the existence of the Kim regime and its massive expenditures in the name of national security. Who could believe such lies? People who have been taught from birth that this is true. Many scholars of North Korea have pointed out that if North Koreans do not believe what the regime tells them, they have nothing to believe in at all.

Not wanting to concede, I pointed out gently that Americans and South Koreans think that the North started the war, which Mr. Kim dismissed out of hand as a lie. Trying to keep the conversation moving I countered that, regardless of who started the war, most people in the South still fear the North Koreans. The sheer size of the North Korean army and the priority that it receives from the government under the military first policy (*seongunjeongchi*) makes the North appear very threat-

ening. Most South Koreans are terrified at the prospect of another Korean War and the effect that it might have on their hard-earned prosperity.

This amused Mr. Kim. Gloating somewhat, he told me that North Koreans are not afraid of war. While peace is certainly preferable, he said repeatedly that North Koreans are prepared for war and would fight ferociously. I was tempted to say that South Koreans are also prepared for war, despite their dread of it. Most experts agree that the South would defeat the North in a conflict, but not before North Korean artillery and rockets leveled large sections of Seoul. North Korea may have one of the largest armies in the world, but they lack the equipment and infrastructure to defeat the South or even repel the likely counter invasion if the regime initiated a conflict.⁴ I did not explain this to Mr. Kim. I did not see the point. In that aftermath of a sudden war on the peninsula, no one would feel like a victor.

As we neared Wonsan I thanked Mr. Kim for a frank conversation and he also thanked me for a good discussion. I was pleased with our exchange and also convinced that Mr. Kim had given not only the party line on these topics, but also his own line—they were likely one and the same. How could they be otherwise? He was educated in its most elite schools and taught a particular worldview since he was young. This worldview is elastic enough to manage new information without forcing a shift in outlook. In our conversation he dismissed as impossible the idea that the South could fear the North if this fear was based on past aggression, which in his mind never existed. However, he visibly gloated when I told him that the South feared a future war with North Korea. The first example clashed with his view of the North as an innocent victim, so he dismissed it. The second corroborated his belief in the virtue and might of North Korea, so he accepted it. It seems he was willing to accept my assertions about North-South relations, once he found a way to fit them into his worldview.

The ability to do this is certainly not limited to North Koreans. We all do this as we attempt to make sense of our surroundings and experiences. What is notable in this case is how many people expect the North Korean worldview to be too rigid to accept outside information without crumbling. The regime's lies are so blatant that many North Korea watchers have been writing its obituary for the last twenty years. They believe the maxim "you can't fool all of the people all of the time." Unfortunately to maintain a regime like North Korea's it appears that "you just need to fool some of the people most of the time." If Mr. Kim is any indication, the regime is amazingly efficient at cultivating the loyalty of North Korea's elite class. In fact, loyalty may not be a strong enough word to describe the way Mr. Kim and the rest of our guides felt about the regime. During our visits to the Airirang Mass Games, the Kim Il-sung Mausoleum, and other monuments to the Kims, our guides displayed a devotion to their leaders, especially to the late Kim Il-sung that was both passionate and convincing. I had no sense that the breathless quality in their voices as they discussed the eldest Kim was forced. The "cult of personality" that is so much lampooned in the Western media appeared to be just that, a cult, a religion, devoted to the worship of one of the 20th century's worst demagogues. Make no mistake, the North Korean regime could collapse tomorrow, but it should not surprise anyone

if the Kim regime limps on for several decades on the devotion of those who truly believe.

Free on the Beach

I had chosen the strategy of engaging my guides because I believed I would not have the opportunity to interact with any other North Koreans. Yet that is exactly what happened on our beach excursion in the city of Wonsan. I fully expected us to be sequestered in a special foreigners-only beach, completely isolated from the masses. I was both right and wrong. We did arrive at a special “foreign” section of the beach, but the fence that demarked this area was in such a state of disrepair as to be nonexistent. North Koreans by the dozens were strolling up and down the beach with no respect for the barrier. When I inquired if we were allowed to talk with them our guides responded as if they were offended that I even asked. I was still in disbelief as I eagerly headed out unsupervised to find some “average” North Koreans with whom to converse. I expected our guides to change their minds at any minute and run after me, but they did not.

I quickly realized that this freedom was not going to yield the desired results. I would approach a group of Koreans and give a very polite greeting, which always met with an equally polite response. But when I started to introduce myself nearly all of them looked startled and quickly walked away. Exchanging pleasantries with a foreigner was probably harmless for them, but having a conversation with a Korean-speaking foreigner might be risky. It soon struck me that the regime probably did not worry about visitors like me in the slightest. I had been sure that I would be watched night and day to make sure I would not have any contact with North Koreans besides my guides. I thought surely (and naively) the regime must be afraid I might say something “true” to a North Korean that would puncture the regime’s carefully constructed bubble of lies in a matter of moments. What a fantasy that was. These people were products of a system of control that was so efficient they largely policed themselves. My guides had turned me loose in a crowded beach without the slightest fear that I would “contaminate” anybody.

Frustrated, I went for a swim. In the water I passed a father giving his daughter a swimming lesson and I apparently got too close because when the little girl saw me she became very afraid and refused to focus on the lesson, staring at me instead. Her father told her not to be afraid and that she should greet me politely rather than stare. When he told her this he referred to me not as a “foreigner,” but with the term *samchon*, which is a polite way to refer to an older person that literally means “unmarried uncle on my father’s side.” This politeness caught my attention and I thought he might be willing to talk. I caught up with him a few minutes later as he and his extended family sat in the sand having a little picnic. I approached them with a bottle of beer and found them just as jovial as I had hoped. He and his extended family were on a short vacation from Pyongyang, three of them were middle school music teachers in Pyongyang. Their ability to take a vacation and their choice of

foreign snacks clearly marked them as part of the same Pyongyang elite that our guides belonged to and may explain why they were willing to talk to a foreigner. Perhaps in North Korea the “faithful” are beyond reproach.

After answering the normal coterie of questions—where had I learned Korean? How old was I?—they asked me to take a picture with them. Their camera was nicer than mine. As we posed for the photo, everyone displayed what in the U.S. we call the “peace sign” with their index and middle fingers and on the count of three said “kimchi” which is the Korean equivalent of saying “cheese” when having your photo taken. These actions astounded me because they were identical to South Korean photo-taking rituals. Where did they learn them? Perhaps they had seen South Korean dramas, which are believed to be very popular on the North Korean black market recently.

I could not believe my luck. They may have been Pyongyang elites, but they were friendly and it turned out that we were staying in the same hotel in Wonsan. I was about to suggest that we meet later that night, when a man dressed in a drab green uniform abruptly ended our conversation. He called the man I had befriended over for a talk some distance away and when he returned he told me politely that they had to go. Not thinking it wise to ask why, I said goodbye and walked back up the beach to where Ms. Cha, our female guide, and several other members of our group were sitting under an umbrella. A few minutes later the man returned and asked Ms. Cha to take a picture with him and his family. I thought this was quite strange, as I did not believe that he had met Ms. Cha. She accompanied him back to his family members where they all took a picture together. I do not pretend to know or understand what happened, but my best guess is that they wanted some proof that the foreigner they were talking to was part of an official tour as a photo of Ms. Cha with her credentials prominently displayed on a lanyard around her neck would show. Perhaps not even the “faithful” are beyond reproach?

Road to Kaesong

The next day we retraced our route back to Pyongyang and then headed south toward Kaesong. This drive took us through the heart of the most fecund and densely populated region of North Korea. On either side of the road rice paddies intermingled with cornfields spread down every valley as far as we could see. In contrast to the fertile valleys the mountains were denuded of trees. The deforestation was total. Between the outskirts of Pyongyang and Kaesong I cannot recall seeing more than a handful of mature trees.

Of all the guides Ms. Cha was the most enjoyable to talk with. She was patient with my fumbling Korean and spoke slowly and clearly so that I could understand her. I started my first conversation with her on the safe topics of jobs and families. Upon learning I was married, she asked if I had any pictures of my wedding. After seeing the wedding pictures on my iPod, we had a long conversation about wed-

dings in the United States and in North Korea. Ms. Cha was in her late twenties and clearly had marriage on her mind.

Our conversation about weddings conveniently led into a topic I had been hoping to discuss. I had read B.R. Myers *The Cleanest Race* a few months before traveling to North Korea and was quite impressed by his analysis that “racial purity” is a large portion of the glue that binds North Korean society. I thought a good way to obliquely approach this topic would be to ask our guides their views on intermarriage between Koreans and other foreigners. I have had this conversation dozens of times in the South and usually hear that of course marriage between Koreans and non-Koreans is fine, but that personally they’d avoid it because of the trouble it would cause in their families. Wondering how Ms. Cha, who was obviously in the market for a husband, would respond to this question I began by asking her to describe her “ideal type” regarding the opposite sex. Of course, like women in many places, being tall and handsome was a plus, being university educated a must, and coming from a good family was essential.

Having learned her “ideal type” I asked if she’d be interested in a man who had all those qualifications but was a foreigner. To my surprise she said she would, but they could never get married because the government would not allow it. Pretending to be shocked by this “revelation” I asked why not. She was clearly at a loss for words and after a short delay softly answered with a long drawn out *geulseyo* (“well”) that trailed off into silence. She had no other explanation that she was willing to give. I continued playing dumb and told her that in other countries citizens were generally allowed to marry foreigners and was confused as to why North Koreans were not. Since our Korean guides clearly wanted us to view North Korea as just another country, I found it worthwhile to gently compare North Korea to other “normal” countries from time to time. She only answered me with the same expression she had just used and then we sat in silence. Perhaps Ms. Cha did not really know or understand the reason intermarriage was forbidden, or possibly she understood that explaining North Korean racial policies was not good propaganda.

This was not the first time Ms. Cha would surprise me. She was more similar to women I had met of comparable status in South Korea than I had thought possible. Fashionably dressed and well-powdered, she spoke the same flowing cadence as the women of Gangnam. She also seemed to display an interest in consumer goods that was decidedly unrevolutionary. While all the guides took a keen interest in my iPod, Ms. Cha seemed more interested in the world it presented than in the device itself. She was enamored with a photo of my wife’s wedding ring. She demanded to know its value and I took a bit of pleasure in toying with her by telling her it was *very* expensive but refusing to reveal the actual price. I enjoyed turning the tables on Ms. Cha for a brief period, making her probe and cajole to get information. When I finally told her its worth she was not shocked and her response seemed to indicate that having such a ring was not unimaginable.

Road to Pyongyang

After taking in the sights at Kaeseong and the obligatory visit to the DMZ, we returned to Pyongyang the next day. I sat next to Ms. Cha again trying to make the most of our final bus ride. After some small talk, I asked Ms. Cha to send a personal message to the American people. I explained that few Americans travel to the DPRK and so many people would ask me about her country. Was there anything she wanted me to tell them? She declined to say anything herself but rather just wished that I would be honest and truthful about what I had seen—explaining that North Korea was just a normal country. The expression on my face betrayed the fact that this might be difficult. Sensing my doubts she decided to help. What about my experience in North Korea had been different than I expected? She was looking for me to say something positive.

I was on thin ice. North Korea was honestly worse than I expected, and I had expected it to be bad. I thought my image of North Korea as an Orwellian dystopia would be challenged when I actually experienced it, but it only became more concrete. The depth and totality of the regime's control was apparent everywhere; North Koreans policed themselves. The poverty of the country was utterly depressing; I have been to poor places before, but what made North Korea different was the evidence of a developed and even wealthy past. The apartment complexes in Wonsan resembled those in Seoul and were once no doubt comfortable dwellings and could be again if they had windows, heat, and electricity. The power lines that cut across the mountains showed proof of electrification; the hulks of factories showed that North Koreans once produced something and had jobs. Tragically this development was halted and reversed because of the ideological commitments and the power lust of a few to the detriment of millions. North Korea is an island of poverty in one of the fastest growing regions of the world. While South Koreans and Chinese open special clinics to deal with obesity, millions of North Koreans are malnourished and one natural disaster away from starvation.

It was hard to think of something positive to say, but if I didn't, I feared I would lose the goodwill of Ms. Cha. After racking my brain I replied lamely that I expected North Koreans to hate Americans when in fact they had been very friendly.

"Of course North Koreans don't hate Americans," she assured me. "Why would we let you come here if we hated you? I would not talk to you if I hated you."

She told me that North Koreans actually love the American people, but it is the American government and soldiers that they hate. Explaining her hatred of American soldiers, she recounted the American bombing campaign during the Korean War, as if she had lived through it. It is an episode not well known in the United States, but known by heart in North Korea. The scale of the devastation, which the U.S. Air Force wreaked on North Korea, is sadly easy to comprehend. Imagine the devastation of Dresden or Tokyo and superimpose it over every North Korean city of any size. Whether visiting such devastation on enemy civilians is justified or not in a time of war is not my concern here, but right or wrong it leaves legacies of its own that do not easily disappear.

When I asked how the United States and North Korea could move forward it triggered the same conversation I had had with Mr. Kim about the necessity of an American withdrawal from the South. Ms. Cha seemed to be more understanding of my explanation than Mr. Kim. I explained that American forces in Korea were currently being redeployed to positions South of Seoul and so posed less of a threat to the North than they had previously. I then outlined the South Korean plan for unification as disseminated by the South Korean Ministry of Unification, which called for a two-stage federation before unification. It seemed that this was the first detailed plan of unification that she had ever heard and to my great surprise she was intrigued by it.

I was beginning to think Ms. Cha was dangerously open-minded when she seemed to remember that American nuclear weapons were a deal breaker. It would be impossible, she said, to make any agreement with the Americans while the North was threatened by nuclear weapons, which she believed were still in the South. I told her that I did not believe that there were American nuclear weapons in the South anymore, and even if there were, with current missile technology, their location was not that important. This led us into a brief conversation about “no first use” policies that some countries have adopted regarding nuclear weapons. She eventually agreed that if all U.S. nuclear weapons were withdrawn from the peninsula and the United States adopted a “no first use” policy toward its nuclear arsenal, better relations might be possible.

I was elated by our conversation, not that I think Ms. Cha’s views were in any way representative of the regime and not because I believe there are many people like Ms. Cha in North Korea, but simply because we had had a conversation in which we had each listened and tried to understand each other.

Feeling like I was on a roll and thinking that it was time to ask some more probing questions, I told Ms. Cha I was confused why visitors to North Korea could not travel freely—like they could in other countries.

“It’s for your protection,” she said.

“Is North Korea dangerous?” I asked. “Would North Koreans attack me?”

She was horrified, “No, no. Our country is very safe. You have nothing to fear. No one would harm you. But we never know what those in the South might do, or if the Americans would invade, what would you do? You need us to protect you.”

The thought of the diminutive Ms. Cha in her high heels protecting me from anything, much less a company of South Korean (or American) Marines was enough to bring a smile to my face.

Ms. Cha again took the conversation into dangerous territory when she asked what average Americans think of North Koreans. Given the success of the conversation so far I attempted to tell something like the truth. I began by explaining that the average American does not have a favorable opinion of North Korea and American leaders worry greatly about the North’s army and nuclear weapons program. I also explained that North Korean devotion to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il unnerves most Americans: when our presidents die, we bury them. She countered that Amer-

icans could never understand what Kim Il-sung had done for the Korean people—liberating them from the Japanese, defending them from the Americans during the Korean War, and developing their country into a “prosperous” state. I readily agreed that most Americans would never understand that, but added that we worry for other reasons as well. I paused to choose my words carefully, “Americans worry that if Kim Jong-il ever made a mistake the North Korean people might just go along with it and something very bad could happen.”

“Kim Jong-il does not make mistakes.” She said it gently, as if communicating a deep truth that I had been missing the whole time. It was as if she was explaining something elemental to a child for the first time and she was utterly sincere. Her declaration was more than a little troubling, so I pushed on.

“I mean we worry that if Kim Jong-il decided to invade the South, he could do so, and the entire country would just go along with it.”

“We would. Of course we would,” she said without hesitation.

“Yes and that would be a big mistake,” I said losing a bit of patience.

“We don’t worry about our leader making mistakes,” she repeated in the same earnest tone.

“Yes, I know,” I said, not even attempting to hide the sarcasm in my voice. “And because you don’t worry, the rest of the world does.”

I said the last phrase in brisk English and, thankfully, I do not think she understood the barb in it. Sarcasm rarely crosses cultures well. It was a foolish statement on my part.

We were on the outskirts of Pyongyang now. Knowing that our conversation was coming to an end I thanked Ms. Cha for talking with me. She told me she was happy to hear different opinions on world events since the North Korean news coverage of international affairs was sparse and highly simplified. She told me she wished she could watch CNN or the BBC to learn about other countries.

This was a fascinating development. I wanted to keep her talking, so I played dumb and told her that I thought North Koreans could watch these channels, after all they were on the televisions in our hotel rooms. She replied that they are only in the foreigners’ rooms. Still pretending to be shocked, I told her this was very surprising because I had never been in a country whose citizens could not watch these channels. I asked very earnestly why North Koreans were not allowed to watch them. She paused and then for the second time in two days she let out a *geulseyo* (“well”), drawing out the word as Korean women so easily do. Her tone had an air of secrecy about it and the optimist in me would like to believe that when she refused to answer she was really communicating, “you know damn well why they don’t show CNN and the BBC here,” but I do not honestly believe that was her intent. I waited for her to continue but she would not. She could have easily said that these Western media sources spread nothing but capitalist propaganda and hateful lies against her country, but she did not. My most honest assessment of her response, and her willingness to broach the subject in the first place was that she really did not understand why these channels were banned. Ms. Cha knew enough of the outside world to have doubts about what she was told, but her worldview was too clouded by years

of indoctrination to know what questions to ask, who to believe, or perhaps even recognize the sinister nature of the system she lived in.

Debriefing with my other Korean-speaking companions when back in China, we concluded that our guides were indeed true believers in the regime's propaganda, but were believers with doubts. Their constant contact with foreigners raises questions in their minds, but not to the point where it challenges the epistemological structure the regime has built. If it is true that some North Korean elites do have doubts about the regime and question its practices, there may be some cause for optimism. However, it may also be a sign that the personality cult of Kim Il-sung and his progeny has graduated to the status of an actual cult, which now virtually functions as the religion of North Korea. In religious belief systems trust in a divine being is often sufficient to overcome factual inaccuracies and doubts.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard explained this process as what he called the "leap of faith." Kierkegaard believed that evidence and logic take the believer only so far. Eventually believers are confronted with a crisis where they must choose to make a "leap of faith," that is to believe passionately in the object of their belief, in Kierkegaard's case Christianity. This leap of faith enables one to hold paradoxes that would have previously shaken their belief system. It allows Christians to believe a whole host of paradoxical things such as the completely divine and completely human nature of Christ. Perhaps it is a similar type of faith that allowed Ms. Cha to tell me with a straight face that Kim Jong-il does not make mistakes while also refusing to explain or defend North Korea's policies on intermarriage or media censorship. If enough North Koreans have made such a "leap of faith" then there is reason to believe that the regime could remain in power for some time. This does not mean that the North Korean regime runs on faith alone. It is certainly supported by widespread and shocking coercion, which was hidden from my eyes when I was there. In this too it is similar to a religious belief system where there are rewards, sometimes outlandish ones, for the faithful, and punishments for the nonbelievers.

Ecce Homo?

On the way to the airport, we made a final stop at the giant Kim Il-sung statue at Mansudae, where our guides expected us to bow and lay flowers at Kim's feet. I dreaded bowing here, but I knew that not bowing would be impolite so as I had done in the mausoleum, I tried to keep my bow shallow and respectful rather than reverent. After bowing we stood to the side and watched a group of seven elderly ladies. They were already so hunched over from years of labor that it seemed as if they were permanently bowing, but when they came before the Great Leader they still managed to get lower. Their living memories no doubt stretched back to the days before Kim Il-sung had managed to transform himself into a god; back to the days when the Soviets installed Kim as the leader of North Korea, shocking Korean sensibilities because of his youth; back to the days when factionalism rather than hero-worship was the most salient feature of North Korean politics; back to the days when

Kim Il-sung was just a party leader and not the mythical founder of a nation. Who did they think they were bowing to? Kim Il-sung the man or Kim Il-sung the god?

My last views of North Korea were from the small windows of the same Soviet-era jet that had carried us there. From 35,000 feet North Korea looks like just another country, but sadly that is not the case. What to do with North Korea is an incredibly complicated question fraught with uncertainties and potential disasters. Even if, as would seem an incredible stroke of luck, the regime collapses before it develops a viable delivery system for its nuclear weapons, the 20 million people who live there will not lose their faith overnight. The cult of the Kims will live on for at least a generation among the true believers in North Korea, and even those who are silently critical of the regime will not openly embrace a “new” history of their country that replaces their heroic narrative of self-sufficiency and innocent victimhood with one of massive man-made failure, naked aggression, and hideous internal oppression. Discussions of reunification of the Korean peninsula often center on how much it will cost South Korea and the international community. Though harder to quantify, the social dislocations involved in integrating and reeducating millions of people held so long in a malicious isolation will present no less of a challenge.

Notes

1. To protect the organization that arranged my trip, I am not including the dates of my travel in this essay. The names of my Korean guides have also been changed.

2. Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945–1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p.70.

3. Exactly how this transition was accomplished is a matter of much scholarly debate. For current perspectives see B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters*, 1st ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2010); Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 341 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2012); Heonik Kwon, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics*, Asia/Pacific/perspectives (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

4. Roger Cavazos, “Mind the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality,” NAPSNet Special Reports, June 26, 2012, <http://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/mind-the-gap-between-rhetoric-and-reality/>.

Biographical Statement

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