

Dear Leader

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June 18, 2018



On Sunday evening I spent a delightful and informative evening with Jang Jin-sung the bestselling author of 'Dear Leader', his story of life as a high ranking propagandist in North Korea and his escape to the south. He was among the 'admitted' to the protected inner circle of Kim Jong-II. In the book he details his disillusionment, fall into mortal danger and, escape to China and on to South Korea in 2004. As an added bonus he brought along Kang Cheol-hwan, another bestselling author whose book, 'Aquariums of Pyongyang' also deals with real life in North Korea. Kang gracefully participated in the Q and A session.

The evening was put together by TNKR by Co-founders Casey Lartigue and Lee Eun-koo as a Donor Appreciation Night for friends and donors that help keep TNKR alive and functioning. The event was held at the TNKR offices in Mapo district in Seoul and about twenty folks were in attendance. It was an intimate setting with time for questions and photos.

In preparation for the event, I bought the Kindle edition of Jang's book and read it. It's not only a good story but is also a window into the lives of both the elite and ordinary people under the dictatorship of the Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il. I am familiar with much of the narrative but was also fascinated by some of the revelations that could come from only a highly placed insider.

Jang was both a musician and a poet. His literary talent and family connections won him a place in an elite work group known as United Front Division, a part of the all-powerful Workers Party. His section specialized in targeting both South Koreans and fellow North Koreans by creating works of literature under false South Korean names and styles in order to influence left leaning political groups in the south to accept Kim Jong Il as the leader of all Korea.

Under direction from his bosses he wrote a poem praising Kim Jong Il in this role and the work was read by and commended by the Dear Leader himself. Because of this he was elevated to the rare status of being among the 'admitted'. This gave him special status, a kind of protection (he couldn't be arrested by the security services without the approval of Dear Leader), and also invites to personal audiences with the top dog himself.

Of course the closer you get to the psychopath at the top, the more dangerous your life becomes due in part to the absolute necessity to stay at the top amidst the treachery and infighting and also exposure to one's own conscience to the lie. Jang already was in grave internal conflict over the reality of the difference between the life of the elites and the starving and dying people when an accident intervened. As a part of his work as a propagandist, Jang had access to books, newspapers, and other materials from South Korea. He lent a highly classified book to a friend of similar mind. The friend left it on a subway and they both knew they were screwed. They both could only be charged with treason and they would face torture, imprisonment, or death. What's more their families would also be dragged into the sewer if they confessed under torture. Their only option was to escape and they left for the border with China immediately and their long, dangerous, and strange odyssey began.

His relatively inside position among the elite allowed him to share some information and perspective that I found enlightening. Here are a few.

UFD United Front Division, a division of the Workers Party

"After the 1970s, it strove particularly to amplify anti-American sentiment and foster pro-North tendencies among the South Korean population, exploiting the democratic resistance movements that had risen against the then military dictatorship.

Work produced here was circulated under the names of South Korean publishers, and even took on their distinctive literary style, preferred fonts, and quality and weight of paper. In music, too, the styles of instrumental and vocal arrangements were copied from South Korean recordings. Books and cassettes produced in this way were systematically distributed by our department through pro-North organizations in Japan or through other Southeast Asian nations, and passed on to democratic resistance movements in South Korea. My department in this way sowed the seeds of what might at first appear to be a political paradox: even today, sympathy towards the DPRK among South Koreans is almost entirely concentrated within the democratic, progressive and anti-authoritarian camp of the nation's political divide."

The Annals of the Kim Dynasty.

Kim Jong Il decided that since even the corrupt Joseon dynasty had its own annals, the Kim family must have their own and ordered the United Front Division to produce one.

"North Korea asserts that Japan's defeat in 1945 was the direct result of Kim Il-sung's achievement as a guerrilla leader in the anti-Japanese resistance. The Korean War, which was actually suspended by an armistice, is declared to have been Kim Il-sung's outright victory over US imperialism. Even the history of the Cold War is taught in North Korea as a Communist history that revolved around the efforts of Kim Il-sung. The international section of the Central Party became active in setting up Juche Research Institutes overseas, in an attempt to encourage foreigners to sympathize with North Korea's worldview and version of history. One reason why North Korea is unable to pursue reform and open itself more to the world is that this would risk exposing core dogmas of the state as mere fabrications."

"Kim Jong-il decided that under no circumstances should any potentially harmful source material relating to Kim Il-sung's past be made available to the public.

Kim Jong-il's authority had not, as the official narrative of hereditary succession stated, been passed on to him by Kim Il-sung, even though this was what he claimed as the basis of his legitimacy. Rather, the son had usurped the father. The old saying that power cannot be shared between fathers and sons suggests some kind of universal and inevitable fate. The seeds of Kim Jong-il's vicious struggle for power against his father Kim Il-sung were unintentionally sown when the boy was abandoned by his father at the age of eight, after the death of his natural mother, Kim Jong-suk.

We had to concede that, while Kim Jong-il's legitimacy might have been based on hereditary succession from father to son in terms of the official narrative, in reality it had involved usurpation by the son of the father. Kim Jong-il had consolidated power by wresting it away from his father instead of receiving it from him.

But Kim Jong-il was careful to keep up the pretense that father and son got along well. In 1994, after Kim Il-sung's death, the North Korean state publicized artefacts associated with the Supreme Leader's office. Among them was a speech handwritten by Kim Il-sung before his death, in which he proposed a summit to discuss unification with South Korea. This manuscript was even publicly displayed in the Mount Khumbu Memorial Palace for propaganda purposes in support of the ideology of federal unification of the two Koreas. It seemed that Kim Jong-il supported his father's pursuit of peaceful unification. But in reality and behind the scenes, he fiercely opposed it. In 1994, alarmed by the threat of pre-emptive strikes made by the US, Kim Jong-il permitted former US president Jimmy Carter to visit Pyongyang. Kim Il-sung took the opportunity to declare publicly his approval for an inter-Korean summit, and many in the international community noted optimistically that North Korea's leader had reached out to the world. They perhaps did not realize that Kim Il-sung was no longer in control, nor that Kim Jong-il – who did hold power – was pitted against his father.

The document in question is the minutes of a Party meeting that took place in early July 1994, organized by Kim Jong-il himself. According to these minutes, the meeting was titled 'Today's climate calls for practical developmental policies for protecting Socialism, not policies for unification of the homeland'. It called on cadres to discredit all thoughts of unification associated with the inter-Korean summit that his father had proposed, going so far as to state that his suggestions were indicators of senility. In fact, the conversation records a meeting that was held among Kim Jong-il's closest associates not only to criticize Kim Il-sung's proposal, but to obstruct it."

Amazing stuff.

Sunday evening's event took the form of a Q and A session. The first question was predictably, about the recent summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un and what was Jang's impression.

He started out by commenting that if he could speak English better he'd make more trouble for North Korea by telling the truth about the regime around the world.

Then he mentioned that there are two North Koreas. The one that people around the world know about which is fake and the actual North Korea. He blamed the South Korean government for most of the misinformation about the north. His opinion of the summit is that although Trump started out well by both telling the truth and enforcing sanctions against the north, Trump's tough stance forced Kim to the summit. But the actual results were disappointing. The summit ended with a cave in to the deception of North Korea. The joint statement referenced the Panmunjom declaration between North and South Korea that gave no specifics or a timetable for denuclearization. This allows North Korea to set the agenda from now. He said there is still a lot of hope because Donald Trump can always change course.

When asked what is the most effective way to bring change to North Korea he replied; The North is a paper tiger. Their economy is smaller than one American state and the U.S. could crush them by words alone. In the past sanctions hurt the common people more than the regime. Since 1997 a new black market economy has risen up and has almost created a second state. The people have more than one option, the option of starving to death. Today sanctions hurt the elite and the government agencies much more than the people. Sanctions brought the Kim regime to the bargaining table. Tighter sanctions will bring them to their knees.

Someone asked if Kim will give up his nukes.

The nuclear weapons are not for the defense of the nation. They are for the defense of the Workers Party. They will never denuclearize until the one party system crumbles.

They were asked if any government agency sought their advice prior to the summit. Kang said the U.S. Embassy in Seoul met with him and asked for his recommendation. He advised them to solve the nuclear issue as quickly as possible and then turn to the gulag system still in place and approach it as a human rights issue. In South Korea, the media and the government is blocking the input of the defectors because it doesn't match their narrative. Refugees are not advisors but can only give testimony.

I asked, in light of the power struggle between Kim Jong Il and his father, are we sure who we are dealing with? Who is the real power in North Korea today?

The answer made sense to me. The most powerful people around Kim Jong Un are the 'Third Floor'. There was considerable discussion as to what the proper translation should be. The butlers was one suggested translation. They left it at 'third floor' but I think that the correct translation should be the Secretariat. These are the folks who control the daily schedule, control what the dictator sees or reads, and controls access. The Workers Party is firmly in control.

A young lady who grew up in North Korea and escaped and is not an eloquent outspoken opponent of the regime said that when she was growing up she witnessed public executions almost every day and asked why this has, seemingly, stopped now.

Jang replied that probably it is because Kim Jong Il and his son have had different educations. Kim Jong Un went to school in Switzerland and is more sensitive to public opinion, on the other hand his father was educated in the north under the Workers Party and felt the need to maintain control through public terror. His son wants to be loved by the people and feels the most threat from those in high positions and thus he has executed many high-ranking cadres. Executions of ordinary people are now carried out in seclusion. Kim Il Sung executed folks with the AK-47. Kim Jong Il used machine gun, and now the grandson uses artillery rounds. This escalation is a sign of increasing nervousness of the party's control. The elite of North Korea are most afraid of war. They have everything to lose.

Jang said, sanctions are the best way to change North Korea. Pressure is the right way to confront them but until now the world has not properly pressured North Korea. Information into the north will bring the best results. Information aimed at the ordinary people will change everything.

Next both Jang and Kang were asked what was the best way to get information into the north. The young lady activist spoke up again and said she watched movies in the north and said why can't I wear earrings and makeup?

Both Jang and Kang recommended USBs with information and movies, literature, and radio broadcasts. They said the best information is to directly dispute the dogma of the Kim dynasty and the Workers Party.

The most important conclusion to a meeting like this is the call to action. What can I do? The next big project of TNKR is Information Into North Korea. Let's flood North Korea with the truth. You can help by supporting TNKR financially or with your talents.