

'A SPARK IN THE
DARK OF NORTH
KOREA' *THE TIMES*

JOHN SWEENEY

NORTH KOREA UNDERCOVER

**INSIDE THE WORLD'S MOST
SECRET STATE**



About the Book

North Korea is a tyranny like no other. It is *Macbeth* with nuclear weapons. For three generations the Kim family have ruled by fear, fabrication and relentless propaganda. The people are told their home is the greatest nation on earth. Do they believe it? Who can say. Big Brother is always watching.

Posing as a university professor, award-winning BBC journalist John Sweeney travelled undercover to gain access to the world's most secret state. Drawing on his experiences and his extensive interviews with defectors, commentators and key witnesses, *North Korea Undercover* pulls back the curtain, providing a rare insight into life there today and addressing important questions about the regime's uncertain future.

Sweeney's highly engaging, authoritative account illuminates the dark side of the Hermit Kingdom and challenges the West's perception of this paranoid nationalist state.

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Also by John Sweeney.
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NORTH KOREA UNDERCOVER

INSIDE THE WORLD'S MOST
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John Sweeney

To the forgotten of the gulag

*The woman was paper-thin
A sign hung from her neck:
'Selling my daughter, 100 won'*
[100 won is roughly 73 US cents or 47p]
Jang Jin Seong, 'Selling My Daughter'

*The Leader is the supreme brain of a living body, the Party
is the nerve of that living body, and the masses are only
endowed with life when they offer their absolute loyalty*
Juche, the guiding philosophy of the North Korean
regime, set out in Kim Jong Il's *Ten Principles*

*Life, in the abstract, in its great coach - how nice;
But amidst vomit and outrage the real thing triumphs,
It flows, sewage and decay ...
I suffer moons, hungers, cruel Christs of pus ...
I give in bone the explanation of this, my misfortune*
'Pieta' by North Korean gulag inmate 1967-74, Ali
Lameda

A Note on the Text

Translating text from one alphabet to another is always fraught. Koreans write their names, to us, backwards, so the surname comes first. The South Koreans hyphenate the forenames, making the second name lower case; thus I would be Sweeney John-paul. But North Korean practice, according to former British ambassador John Everard, is to write 'each syllable with a capital letter and without a hyphen between the last two. Thus I write Kim Il Sung rather than Kim Il-sung.' I follow that advice.

Where necessary, I have disguised the identity of people on the trip and North Koreans.

Introduction

The Air Koryo jet floated down to earth, the ground below treeless, bleak. The plane landed smoothly enough, but then we wobbled down an immensely long and bumpy runway, past banks of earth, sinister watchtowers and threadbare sprigs of barbed wire, straight out of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Down the plane's steps, one small leap and on to North Korean concrete. I thought to myself: What in Pyongyang do we do now?

The longer you spend in North Korea, the less fearful you become. Fear is fuelled by ignorance. The simple goal of this book is to make the world's most secretive state a little less unknown, to map this terra incognita that loves to tell us: Be afraid. It ain't easy.

Understanding North Korea is like figuring out a detective story where you stumble across a corpse in the library, a smoking gun beside it, and the corpse gets up and says that's no gun and it isn't smoking and this isn't a library. It is like nowhere else on earth. No ads burble. No traffic dragon roars. No birds sing. Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il smile down at you from a giant diptych hoarding. No one smiles back.

Kim Il Sung is Kim the First, but in the regime's iconography he comes across as an *über*-effeminate God-the-Mother, all mumsy and 1950s, a celestial Doris Day. Kim Jong Il, aka Kim the Second, is God-the-Lousy-Elvis-Impersonator in bouffant hairdo and elevator heels, creepy, beyond weird. Kim Jong Un is Fat Boy Kim, threatening thermo-nuclear war against the United States one day,

reportedly having his ex-girlfriend machine-gunned the next.

Our frog-green tourist coach kicks into life and our black-suited minder, Mr Hyun, breathes into the mike: 'At the moment the situation is very tense. Nobody knows when the war will be provoked but we will be safe. Our bus has the mark of the Korean International Travel Company so the Americans won't strike our bus. Ha ha ...'

Is the threat of nuclear war real? Has it ever been? Three words: I don't know. What I do know is this: they took us along a vast motorway. There were no cars. They took us to a university. There were no students. They took us to a library. There were no books, at least no books worth reading and certainly no George Orwell's *1984* – I did ask; a bottling plant, no bottles; an electricity-generating machine factory, no electricity; a children's camp, no children; a farm, no animals; a hospital, patients, but only in the morning. Then the lights went out. The dictatorship tells lies about ordinary things.

The evidence from our eight days inside North Korea, when Kim Jong Un's threats of thermo-nuclear war were at their most frenzied, suggests – how to put this diplomatically? – that the regime is full of dross. If North Korea launches a nuclear strike, the regime and everybody in it will die. The working hypothesis of *North Korea Undercover* is that Kim Jong Un's talk of nuclear war is a confidence trick and that the Pyongyang bluff is blinding us to a human rights tragedy on an immense scale.

To make the confidence trick work, the regime keeps everybody – outsiders and its own people – in the dark. Understanding what happens in front of your eyes is beyond strange. You are left wondering at your own grip on reality, like the moment in *The Matrix* when Neo sees a black cat walk by, and then another black cat walks by just like the first one, causing Trinity to warn him: 'A déjà vu is

usually a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something.' During our trip we saw no cats and one dog.

Time and again a glitch in the North Korean matrix has you scratching your head. Did I see that? Is that for real? It is, of course, deliberately crepuscular, an exquisitely constructed fog machine. North Korea feels like Kafka written in an alphabet no one can read. But in the murk, the regime hides its cunning.

Kim the Third's hysterical threat of nuclear war is part of a bleak but clever logic that has kept the dynasty in power long past its two great benefactors – Soviet Russia and Communist China – are dead and gone or mutated beyond all recognition.

The madness shines so bright it's hard to make out the survivalist logic lurking in the dark. Go see Kim Il Sung. The Great Leader, the Sun of the Nation, the Iron All-Victorious General, the Marshal of the Mighty Republic, the Eternal President is the subject of total love from his nation of 23 million people – or is it three million less? – and grants them an audience, every day of the year.^{fn1} Accessible, yes, but you can't talk to the nation's head of state because Kim the First has not been alive these past nineteen years. This makes the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea the world's only necrocracy. That is: government by zombie.

The living-dead god lies in warmth and light in a glass box, a waxwork. The hideous goitre or growth the size of a grapefruit on his neck so artfully airbrushed out of all photographs in later life has been, in death, surgically removed. But be wary of mocking the zombie-god too much: in 1945 this thing in the glass box created the most successful tyranny in modern times, a hereditary gangsterism whose lock on power is still strong.

In life, Kim Il Sung was a thug, hand-picked by Stalin's gang to take over the half-nation which emerged from

Japanese occupation in the wake of the second world war. In 1950 Kim One, convinced that the people of the South would flock to his banner, started the Korean Civil War in which around three million died. Three years later the boundaries of his state were back to where they had been when he started the killing. At the De-Militarized Zone or DMZ, the colonel in charge told us that the Americans had started the war, a lie so big every North Korean appears to believe it. Kim the First created a personality cult that has brainwashed his people for three generations, and a gulag system for anyone who questions that brainwashing. At Pyongyang's Kumsusan Memorial Palace our minders – good people, zombie master – made it clear that we must bow to Kim the First, and we did, three times.

In a second chamber, the Great Leader's son, the Dear Leader, lies in a second glass box. The story goes that the son had the father murdered after a bitter row in which the ailing and flatulent old man finally woke up to the starvation afflicting his people.^{fn2} Funnily enough, they whisper, all the doctors and security agents attending the dying Father of the Nation died mysteriously or vanished into the gulag.^{fn3} True? False? Who knows? The best book about North Korea, someone said, was written in 1592 and it is called *Richard III*.

Kim Jong Il in death still looks like Bad Elvis. His image to the rest of the world was nailed by *South Park's* brilliant puppet show film, *Team America*, in which he sings:

I'm So Ronery
So ronery
So ronery and sadry arone.

I dared to sing that in North Korea while no one was listening, and even so it scared the pants off me. The puppet-masters appear to have got the *roneriness* wrong. Kim Two reportedly pleased a human bed of hand-picked

North Korean beauties and when he got bored with them, busty whores from Sweden and Bavaria were flown in for his entertainment.^{fn4} For a long time, the West wondered whether he was a monosyllabic halfwit with only one sentence ever uttered in public: 'Glory to the people's heroic military!' But the real man was smarter than that. Defectors report that K2 was a sly, thoughtful Bond-villain-without-the-white-pussy-cat, a man of some charm and a self-deprecating wit. At one of his lavish parties for the elite, he told the beautiful South Korean actress whom he'd had kidnapped, Choi Un Hee: 'I'm as small as a midget's turd, aren't I?'

When a group of dancing girls started screaming: 'Long live the Great Leader!' Kim Two told Choi's husband, the South Korean film director Shin Sang Ok, also kidnapped, 'All that is bogus. It's just a pretence.'^{fn5} He could say that, but no one else would dare.

And how can you satirize this? That during the 1990s Kim Jong Il presided over a man-made famine in which as many as three million people died. Zeros dull the mind. A North Korean defector told me the story of why he got out. The decision was forced on him, he said, after his three-year-old niece, at the height of the famine, gorged herself on dried corn, and then her stomach burst. They call the famine the 'Arduous March'. Orwell's great insight into the totalitarian mind-set was to point out how Big Brother took over language and rendered it his servant, and that people with free minds had to push back against this insidious linguistic trick. North Korean Newspeak may call the March Arduous but it was also wholly unnecessary, an indictment of the regime's failure to feed its own people. This malfunction is even more dark when you consider that just on the other side of the DMZ lies one of the most successful societies on earth. South Korea is rich and, these days, democratically handsome. (It has its own troubles too. South Korea has

one of the highest suicide rates in the world, with it being the most common cause of death for those under forty.) Part of North Korea's tragedy is that it cannot evolve into a tyranny less harsh. All it can do is stay the same, or die and be swallowed up by its southern twin, which is, according to some estimates, around thirty-eight times richer, its citizens on average three inches taller than their northern brothers and sisters. As regime death is not an option for the Kim dynasty and the Pyongyang elite, the nation lurches on, zombie-like, pitiable, blackly comic and scary in equal measure.

The United Nations estimates that one in four of the country's children is currently suffering from hunger and malnutrition – and 4 per cent are severely malnourished.^{fn6} These figures may well understate the true horror. Faking statistics in a country with no journalism is easy. But even if we take these figures at face value, it's likely several thousand infants and children, in the poorest parts of the land, far away from the Pyongyang Belt, are starving to death as you read this book. Had we seen them out of our tourist coach, our minders would have said: 'No photos.'

And then there is the suffering of the invisibles in the gulag. The North Korean regime runs a system of concentration camps in the burning cold of the mountains in which the best estimate is one million people have died over the three generations the Kim dynasty has been in power.

Prisoners inside the gulag suffer 'unspeakable atrocities', according to a preliminary report by a United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) into Human Rights in the DPRK. North Korea blanked an invitation to take part, but once hearings in Seoul began, the DPRK's official news agency, KCNA, described them as slanderous and labelled the hearing participants as 'human scum'.

The head of the inquiry, Australian judge Michael Kirby, said: 'Truth is a defence against "slander". If any of the testimony the COI has heard on political prison camps, international abductions, torture, starvation, intergenerational punishment and so forth can be shown to be untrue, the Commission invites the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to produce evidence to that effect. An ounce of evidence is worth far more than many pounds of insults and baseless attacks. So far, however, the evidence that the COI has heard has largely pointed in one direction - and evidence to the contrary is lacking.'^{fn7}

Do the maths: three million dead in the war Kim Il Sung started; add three million dead from the famine under Kim Jong Il; add one million dead in the gulag and other fatal consequences of political and economic oppression and that equals: seven million people.^{fn8}

Kill seven million people and you would think everyone in North Korea lives in gibbering fear. But Zombie and Sons are adored. People are happy, joking, witty, full of fun. I've been to a dozen or so dictatorships, more often than not undercover: Communist Romania, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Iran, Iraq under Saddam, Libya under Gaddafi, Syria, Chechnya, Zimbabwe, Serbia under Milošević, Cuba, Belarus and North Korea. The latter was the tyranny in which I felt the least sense of personal threat. You can get mugged in Cuba.

Ordinary tyrants demand devotion. In North Korea, the devotion comes pre-programmed. Our minders suggested we bow to Kim Jong Il, too, and we did, three times. On the way out of the Mausoleum, two women were weeping. Nothing compared to the mass mourning which took place after he was announced dead in 2011. Watch it on YouTube. It is a terrifying exhibition of mass grief for a man who must be judged by rational minds as a monster. Do they

mean it? Or is this mass fakery in the twenty-first century?
fn9

The regime began with Kim Il Sung, a streetwise guerrilla fighter gifted a state by Stalin's generals. Japanese occupation had been a great national insult, and for many in the North it was good to have a Korean ruler, however authoritarian. The bloodshed of the civil war followed, after which peace was a blessing. That Kim Il Sung started the war, no one in North Korea can say. In the mid-1950s, as de-Stalinization began to pick up speed in the Communist world, North Korea galloped off in the opposite direction. Kim the First's propagandists first developed a powerful and vicious national Stalinism. This mutated into Jucheism, home-baked Jabberwocky plus a Brobdingnagian cult of personality. As the old man's powers weakened, his son Kim Jong Il built up the Juche cult, rebaptizing it Kimilsungism. Bits of national Stalinism, Jucheism and Kimilsungism are all spouted by the regime when it suits, but the real belief system of the DPRK, the one aggressively fired at its people through television, propaganda posters, the radio and loudspeakers dotted across the nation, is that old black magic: racial purity. There is a subtle difference from Nazi ideology proper: the Koreans of the North are not a master race who must overlord other races, but pure children who must be protected by the Leaders, Great, Dear and Fat, sorry, Young.

Like Hitler's Third Reich, the regime is depressingly popular with masses of North Koreans. They are joyfully in thrall to a political religion. The slavishness of its adherents reminds one of America's death cults, but in North Korea they don't have Kool-Aid. They have nuclear bombs.

The regime's race cult chimes with popular but dark tropes in Korean history. The Nazi-style ideology equates racial purity with human goodness. The impure have no right to life, which is why the evidence suggesting that the

regime commits infanticide is profoundly disturbing. The UN Human Rights inquiry reported: 'A North Korean woman testified how she "witnessed a female prisoner forced to drown her own baby in a bucket".'^{fn10} In my eight days in North Korea, I saw two people who were disabled, and they were both adults. In Africa and Asia and Latin America, you see crippled beggars all the live-long day. The absence of North Korean disabled babies, infants or children raises one troubling question: where are they?

Under Kim Three, it has been goodbye to the last echoes of Communism. In the spring of 2012, giant pictures of Marx and Lenin adorned a building on Kim Il Sung Square; on our trip, one year on, Karl and Vlad had vanished.

Kim Jong Un is now the third generation Kim to lead the dark state. At thirty years of age, he is a fat young man in a very thin nation. He was educated in a fancy school in Switzerland, so he knows the truth about North Korea, even if no one else does. Footage shown on North Korean television shows him visiting a rocky beach on a gunboat. Soldiers crowd around. Kim the Third retreats to the gunboat, which slowly backs away from the beach. The soldiers plunge into the freezing sea, in a state of religious ecstasy. It is beyond bonkers.^{fn11}

On the day Kim the Third threatened to use his nukes in a thermo-nuclear war against the United States, we visited the De-Militarized Zone (or the DMZ or the Zee) where the two halves of Korea meet. The colonel in charge said: 'Don't worry about it,' and patted me on the back. We drove back to Pyongyang and rocked up at a karaoke bar where our minder, Mr Hyun, sang 'My Way'. Thermo-nuclear regrets? Too few to mention. Was this talk of Armageddon for real? Or a shadow game directed at Kim Three's own people, to make them line up behind him?

The government of North Korea tells big lies: about killing and famine and power. But the regime cannot lie

about the darkness. Salute, reader, the Outer Space Treaty of 1967.^{fn12} In space, there is freedom of movement and freedom of speech, two things not available in the Kims' utopia. The iconic image of North Korea taken from deep space was captured in 2011 by a satellite launched by NASA and NOAA, the American equivalent of the Met Office. The satellite boasts an instrument called the Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite, which you can think of as a very sensitive digital camera, producing images of the light emitted by human activity. This gives you the view you might get if you peeked out of the window of the International Space Station, around 500 miles up.

The weather satellite looks down on the face of the earth and shows the world at night, the great cities sparkling with light: New York, London, Moscow, Beijing, Seoul. The capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, emits a feeble glow-worm but the rest of the country lies in darkness so deep you could easily make the mistake of thinking that this land does not exist. And about the truth of the darkness, Kim the Third can do nothing.

In this book are the stories of witnesses to this dark state, among them seven defectors from the North; an IRA man from West Belfast who spent two months in North Korea learning to make bombs; Ceausescu's translator; an American soldier who ran away to the North and, forty years later, managed to get out; an Italian senator; an Italian chef; two translators who endured 'cruel Christs of pus' in the gulag; and a sculptress who vanished from Italy and died unknown to her family, two decades later in Pyongyang.

But locked inside the dictatorship, the people of North Korea do not know how dark their government is. Brainwashing, according to the world's great authority on the subject, Professor Robert Lifton, an American military psychiatrist who treated US servicemen captured in North

Korea, requires constriction of information.^{fn13} The less people know, the more they put up with. From the outside, the less we know, the more our fears grow.

The regime tells big lies about itself, about history. To nail its quintessential dishonesty, I went to North Korea for BBC *Panorama* posing as a history professor. I told a lie to the dictatorship. I did so because the regime ordinarily bans journalists or minds them so tightly that they see next to nothing. The one exception is Associated Press, which boasts an office in Pyongyang. However, AP Pyongyang has been accused of running 'chirpy, upbeat stories rather than real news', effectively, to paraphrase Basil Fawlty, of having a tacit policy of 'Don't mention the gulag.'^{fn14} AP dispute the argument that they self-censor as 'erroneous'.

Going to North Korea undercover sometimes felt like being inside the movie *Argo* but readers should be aware of a strange paradox: although it treats its own people cruelly, the DPRK has generally treated foreign guests with almost comic deference. In 2013, so long as you did not proselytize Christianity, especially if you were a Korean-American missionary, little harm would come to a foreign tourist. North Korea is not Torremolinos. It is much safer.

As a group of students and a fake professor, we were honoured guests of the regime. The best - least bad - comparison I can think of is travelling around Nazi Germany in 1936 during the Munich Olympics. Michael Breen, Kim Jong Il's biographer, also went undercover to North Korea, pretending to be something other than a journalist: 'As foreigners, we felt safe. The worst that could happen was that we would be expelled.'^{fn15} Nothing happened to him. Nothing happened to us.

Inside North Korea, we were accompanied pretty much for every single moment by 'tourist guides' Mr Hyun and Miss Jun. By filming inside North Korea without the regime's blessing, we were accused of endangering the

guides. We did not, according to Simon Cockerell of Koryo Tours, generally a critic of our *Panorama*: 'The guides in the tour shown on the programme are fine. They are still working and I saw them personally when I visited North Korea last week [April 2013]. They were not shown saying anything out of the ordinary and the reporter – other than the raw fact of being a reporter – didn't get up to anything wildly illegal in North Korea.'^{fn16} Cockerell, who has visited North Korea 119 times, says that North Korea is safe for foreign tourists: 'We have run thousands of tours over twenty years and we have never had anyone detained, questioned, molested, ejected or arrested.'

Of President George W. Bush's three axes of evil, Saddam's Iraq, the Ayatollah's Iran and North Korea, the latter is by far and away the safest to visit but also the worst place to live in. Sergeant Charles Robert Jenkins of the US Army defected to North Korea in 1965. Thanks to extraordinary luck and the power of love, he got out after forty years inside what he calls 'a giant demented prison'.^{fn17} He is right, but prisons have guards, not guides. Behind the question: 'Did you endanger the guides?' lies an assumption that North Korea is a normal place to visit.

North Korea is not normal. No ordinary person is free to move around inside the country. No ordinary person can leave it, ever. No free speech. No rule of law. No parliament, worthy of the name. Brainwashing for three generations. The guides work hard to present as normal a picture of North Korea as possible. To push back against the raising of difficult questions, the regime, subtly, pressures foreign visitors to comply with its world view. Obey the guides or they will suffer – that is the message. That pressure is effective.^{fn18} But should it be complied with? The guides, of course, are real flesh-and-blood people. So, too, are the 100,000 political prisoners in the gulag. But they are invisible. By not 'endangering the

guides', is it possible that you are doing a greater disservice to the invisible victims of the regime? When our guides showed us nonsense – for example a hospital with patients, but only in the morning – I mentally imagined the 100,000 or so souls in the gulag cheering us on. But those cheers, and even more their screams, are silent to us. Just because we cannot see or hear them does not mean they do not exist, as Chapter 19: 'The Gulag Circus' sets out.

The human factor kicks in, as ever. Our guards or minders were sweet people but also agents of a dark regime. Richard Lloyd Parry of *The Times* put it bluntly: 'They are privileged, well educated, and (by North Korean standards) well-informed servants of a totalitarian dictatorship. As human beings, they are as various as the rest of us. But putting aside their friendliness, curiosity or the lack of it, their job is to lie, bamboozle and obfuscate.'

There has been a lot of controversy about the mechanics of the trip. My own position is that the people invited to come to North Korea were LSE students and alumni, but it wasn't an LSE trip. The students were told, twice, that a journalist was coming, and they were warned that there was a risk of arrest, detention and the possibility they might not be able to go on a return trip. On the day the group met, the North Koreans carried out a nuclear test. It was all over the news. Anyone who wanted to drop out could have done so. Long before we left London my name was on the paperwork. Again, from my perspective, there was no intention to deceive the students. We followed a BBC instruction that the students should not be told everything – for example, that the 'John Sweeney' they knew they were going with worked for *Panorama* – in case something happened to me and they needed some plausible deniability. In the event, the North Koreans bought my performance as a dodgy academic hook, line and sinker. Nothing untoward happened.

We went as part of a tourist trip, arranged through the KFA, the Korean Friendship Association, which has been described as being 'like one of the more improbable cults'.^{fn19} The KFA's President is Alejandro Cao de Benós or, to use his Korean honorific, Zo Sun Il, which means 'Korea is One'. The Spanish IT consultant, who likes dressing up in North Korean uniform, has been criticized by the *Independent* as an 'ideological brown-noser'. The newspaper cited anonymous critics, describing him as 'the perfect example of the useful idiot'. Another said: 'In my view, he's a narcissist. And he loves the power and control he has over there. He does have real influence. People are frightened of him, and he likes that power. I think his primary motivation is that he's special there.' A third said: 'You can't possibly believe that stuff if you've been there. To come back and tell North Korean people that everything they hear is correct – that the rest of the world is evil, out to cut each other's throats, that war and oppression is everywhere ... he perpetuates that. He's not forced to; he does that for personal gain and power and prestige. It's horrible.'

In his defence, Cao de Benós told the *Independent*: 'I will take this as a type of jealousy from people who have no goals in their life. I have lived a life of big things. I didn't want to dedicate my life to be a slave in the capitalist system. My dream was to be a part of the revolution.'^{fn20}

Once our party was back from Pyongyang, safe and sound, I went on BBC World News, and said the regime was 'mad and sad and bad and silly, all at the same time'.^{fn21}

The North Koreans saw my interview, and Cao de Benós, writing as the Special Delegate for the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries of the DPRK, fired back: 'I am now in communication with LSE representatives ... To obtain a visa without declaring the real purpose of the visit is against the law ... We will ignore

this incident if Mr. Sweeney stops his journalistic activities regarding the LSE-DPRK visit. Otherwise if the related programme is broadcast, I will be left with no choice but to expose all the real story and data. And the only one to blame for this will be Mr. Sweeney ... You decide.'

Cao de Benós made good on his threat. The London School of Economics, my old university, was supplied with the information we'd given to the North Korean embassy in Beijing. The LSE's director, Craig Calhoun, had been in Beijing at the same time that we were.^{fn22}

The LSE went public with North Korea's information on us, condemned what we had done and called for the programme not to be broadcast. The majority of students on the trip disagreed with their own university and later publicly dissociated themselves from the LSE's call to axe the film. The BBC stood firm, and our documentary was aired.

What did the 100,000 North Koreans in the gulag think about the row? That's a difficult question to resolve because they offered no comment at all.

The story splashed in *The Times* and there were questions in Parliament. On Twitter, I was compared to Jimmy Savile, and to Saif Gaddafi, someone who really has a doctorate from the LSE. Getting in and out of the world's most secretive dictatorship is not easy. One solution is not to bother. But it is important that journalists try to shed light on dark places where freedom of thought is snuffed out. One of the great North Korea watchers, Andrei Lankov, has noted: 'No foreigner is allowed to do independent research in Korean libraries, let alone archives. Indeed, typically a foreign visitor is simply denied access to the library catalogues.'^{fn23}

Before transmission, a few students were worried about appearing in our film. We blobbed them out. We did not mention the LSE, nor did we ever intend to. But then, of

course, a very public row blew up with arguments on both sides.^{fn24} Clearly, we got some things wrong but nothing happened to anyone on the trip and we did punch a hole in the regime's brick wall, keeping journalists locked out and information about North Korea locked in.

The BBC Trust examined complaints from the LSE and Mr X, the father of 'Student X', a twenty-eight-year-old post-graduate on the trip who had gone out of her way to help us film inside North Korea. For example, she had got up at dawn to lead us the way up a bluff in the grounds of our spa hotel outside Pyongyang to show us on the other side of the barbed-wire fence a dirt-poor town.

Mr X's business affairs had some years previously been investigated by another part of the BBC. This fact played no role in the Trust's considerations.

In March 2014 the Trust found that out of twenty-one complaints by the LSE and Mr X, our *Panorama* had breached guidelines in four instances.^{fn25} The BBC apologized.

One of the LSE alumni on the trip wrote a blog suggesting that the BBC apology 'only emboldens the actions of regimes like North Korea's'^{fn26} and another pointed out that Student X had attended a talk I gave at the LSE three months before we left for Pyongyang.^{fn27}

More than six million viewers watched our *Panorama*: 'North Korea Undercover'. That's one in ten people in Britain.^{fn28} They saw the ordinary lies the regime told us and listened to defectors – testimony the regime does not want heard. It was broadcast on 15 April, the 'holiest' day in the North Korean calendar, it being Kim Il Sung's birthday, timing which left one of our defector contributors gurgling with joy.

North Korea remains the most rigidly controlled nation on earth, but some of the technological marvels of the twenty-first century are beginning to melt the icepack. Two

million people have mobile phones, but they can only use them for internal calls. At the DMZ, one of the students I was travelling with switched on his iPhone and picked up a signal from phone masts just across the border in South Korea. He tweeted: 'At the DMZ, #JustChillin.' I switched on, and also picked up a signal. If we could do that, so could a North Korean using a smuggled Chinese mobile phone. The regime's icy grip on information is beginning to crack.

Yet the Kim dynasty remains in place almost a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps the greatest mystery of this dark nation is: why haven't the people overthrown the tyranny? Barbara Demick's brilliant, harrowing study of the famine in the 1990s is called *Nothing to Envy*.^{fn29} But a quick survey of the states that have a stake in what happens in North Korea – South Korea, China, Japan and the United States – could be summarized as 'nothing to gain'. South Korea may dislike the tyranny, but does it really want to deal with 20-odd million half-starved and miserably poor compatriots? Does China want a US ally creeping right up to its border? Does Japan want a bigger, stronger all-Korea competitor? Do the United States and the rest of the world want a terrifying transition, when the nuclear-armed tyranny falls and something different takes its place? Or is stasis the lesser evil? In 1987, President Reagan went to West Berlin and told the Soviet leader: 'Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall.' Nothing like that bold command is being said today.

The threat of Armageddon cannot be lightly dismissed. Professor Brian Myers, an expert on North Korean ideology, told me: 'We may see a thermo-nuclear war. I'm sure it's not the North Koreans' plan to unleash that kind of a thing but it might come to that as a result of a disastrous miscalculation.' The counter-argument is that in the darkness of North Korea we may be missing something

darker yet: that fear of change and in particular an over-hyped fear of thermo-nuclear war, a war which Kim Jong Un must know he would lose, very badly, very quickly, is obscuring the reality of a nation suffering immense misery. The tyrant's threat is masking his people's agony.

Everything here represents my own views and not those of the BBC. If you believe the press cuttings, there are times when I must seem to my colleagues a random trouble generator. I apologize to them, and to the great British public, who pay my wages, but to do difficult journalism maybe you have to be a member of the awkward squad.

But I'm a firm believer of shining light in dark places. I've written books about four states of mind-lock not essentially dissimilar to North Korea: Ceausescu's Romania, which I visited in 1985 and then in 1989, when the leader's plans for Christmas ended in a firing squad;^{fn30} Saddam's Iraq;^{fn31} Lukashenka's Belarus;^{fn32} and the Church of Scientology, terrifying and creepy in 2007 and, at the time of writing in 2013, less so.^{fn33}

To understand what is going on in North Korea now, it helps that Romanian Communists, Baathist Iraqis and many Scientologists once assured me with grave solemnity of their undying loyalty to the powers that be, only for them to reveal a few years later that they had been brainwashed. Regimes fall; statues get smashed; the concrete of the mind crumbles to dust.

Outside No Animal Farm, there was a giant statue to Kim the First, surrounded by happy peasants loaded with bushels of corn. Our minders suggested we bow – the seventh time that day – and we did. Two weeks later, in South Korea, I asked a defector and the leader of a brave organization with a Monty Pythonesque name, the North Korean People's Liberation Front, if he had ever seen any graffiti. He said no at first but then he grew animated, remembering seeing one graffito in his whole time in the

North. It was in a town in the north-east of the country, on the wall of a university hospital, and at six o'clock in the morning. Someone had scrawled: 'Down with Kim Jong Il'. The defector drew the ideograms in my notebook, showing how the phrase in Korean is written 'Kim Jong Il - down with' and that the name was clear and bold and the last part hurried, as if it had been dashed out. Half an hour later a crowd of about thirty had gathered, the defector said. Then the police arrived, and painted it out.

One day I shall return to North Korea. The regime is not as strong as it looks. One day the statues of the two mass-murderers will come crashing down. I will find that graffito artist. And I shall bow before him or her - and this time I shall mean it.

fn1 Andrei Lankov: *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea 1945-1960*, Hurst, London, 2002, p70.

fn2 Peter Carlson: 'Sins of the Son', *Washington Post*, 11 May 2003, quoting defector Hwang Jang Yop.

fn3 Victor Cha: *The Impossible State*, Bodley Head, London, 2012, p89.

fn4 Jasper Becker: *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p138.

fn5 Shin Sang Ok, Choi Un Hee, *The Kingdom of Kim*, Tonga Ilbosa, Seoul, 1988.

fn6 <http://www.bigstory.ap.org/article/un-more-14-nkorean-children-malnourished>

fn7

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/UnspeakableatrocitiesreportbyColinNorthKorea.aspx>

fn8 Becker gives high numbers for the famine's death toll in *Rogue Regime*, p209. Lankov gives low numbers in *The Real North Korea*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p80.

fn9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSWN6Qj98Iw>

fn10 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/17/us-korea-north-crimes-idUSBRE98G0B920130917>

fn11 Watch at 8 mins, 45 secs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzerbXJqzZc>

fn12 UN Outer Space Treaty:

<http://www.unoosa.org/oosa/SpaceLaw/outerspt.html>

fn13 Robert Jay Lifton: *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China*, Norton, New York, 1961.

fn14 Donald Kirk: 'The AP Plays Defense on North Korea', *38 North*, 22 March 2013, <http://38north.org/2013/03/dkirk032213/>

fn15 Michael Breen: *Kim Jong Il: North Korea's Dear Leader*, John Wiley, Singapore, 2012, p145.

fn16 <http://thediplomat.com/2013/04/25/debunking-panorama-paranoia-north-korea-tour-leader-simon-cockerell/?all=true>

fn17 See Chapter 17: 'The American Who Went to North Korea and Stayed'.

fn18 One travel writer was asked, prior to being let into North Korea by a tour company, to promise not to 'write about North Korea's human rights record or in any way insult the Dear Leader'. Carole Cadwalladr: 'The strange innocence of the "axis of evil"', *Observer*, 14 February 2010.

fn19 John Everard: *Only Beautiful, Please: A British Diplomat in North Korea*, Stanford University, Stanford, 2012, p139.

fn20 Tim Hume, 'His dear leader: Meet North Korea's secret weapon - an IT consultant from Spain', *Independent*, 21 January 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/his-dear-leader-meet-north-koreas-secret-weapon--an-it-consultant-from-spain-6291303.html>

fn21 'Inside North Korea: "It's a mad, sad and bad place"', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22003715>

fn22 Craig Calhoun: Director, LSE, Beijing, 20 March 2013: 'What Threatens Global Capitalism Now?', LSE China Lecture Series. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/LSEServices/ERD/LSEChina/LSE-China-Lecture-Series/LSE-China-Lecture-Series.aspx>

These days my old university gets money from China in return for teaching Chinese senior government officials. LSE-China: 'Executive Public Policy Training Programme for high level Chinese Government officials has been developed and delivered by LSE and PKU'. This sets out: 'contributions from alumni, friends, trusts and corporations in and from China have supported scholarships, innovative learning and research programmes and developed teaching facilities on campus at LSE.' The scale of funds from the Chinese state entities is not clear. The issue has worried one LSE professor.

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/LSEServices/ERD/LSEChina/pdf/LSE%20and%20China%20brochure.pdf>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1363222/The-day-LSE-sold-soul-Libya-BP-chief-makes-oil-deal-Gaddafi-drags-prestigious-university-disrepute.html>

fn23 Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, pviii.

fn24 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2308876/BBC-crew-used-students-university-human-shields-film-undercover-North-Korea.html> Josh Halliday: *Guardian*, 'Students say LSE has placed them at "more risk" from North Korea', 17 April 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/apr/17/north-korea-students-criticise-lse>

fn25

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2014/panorama_north_korea.html

fn26 BBC Apology Only Emboldens Dictatorial Regimes:

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hoeyeong-loke/bbc-north-korea_b_4983747.html

fn27 <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/student-lse-north-korea-trip-speaks-out-seven-out-tenstudents-trip-dont-feel-exploited-bbc-all>

fn28 5.4 million watched *Panorama* 'North Korea Undercover' on BBC1 and an additional 800,000 watched it on BBC iPlayer. On YouTube, the documentary had more than 1,100,000 views across a number of sites by May 2014 and has also been broadcast by other networks in 15 countries including China and four times on BBC World with a reach of 75 million. With 7.3 million proven viewers, our film may be the most watched documentary on North Korea ever.

fn29 Barbara Demick: *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, Spiegel and Grau, New York, 2009.

fn30 John Sweeney: *The Life and Evil Times of Nicolae Ceausescu*, Hutchinson, London, 1990.

fn31 John Sweeney: *Trading with the Enemy*, Pan, London, 1993.

fn32 John Sweeney: *Big Daddy - Lukashenka, Tyrant of Belarus*, Silvertail Books, London, 2012 (Kindle e-book).

fn33 John Sweeney: *The Church of Fear: Inside the Weird World of Scientology*, Silvertail Books, London, 2013.

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In the Land of the Plastic Toad

Of the five most creepy buildings in the world – the squat grey toad of the KGB/FSB head office in Lubyanka Square, Moscow; the alien spaceship-like Ryugyong Hotel in Pyongyang; the Church of Scientology's blue concrete angel on L. Ron Hubbard Way in LA; Enver Hoxha's marble pyramid mausoleum in Tirana, Albania; and the Pyongyang Planetarium – the latter is the creepiest. A giant disco-ball of a Saturn lookalike with ferro-concrete ring, it stands proud on the plain en route between the airport's cattle-shed arrivals hall and the Big Zombie, Pyongyang itself, visible from the main road through a sickly copse.

There's something of the coelacanth about the futurology of the recent past, back then when men wore big specs and women had big hair. The Pyongyang Saturn was supposed to project just what an essential part of the future the Democratic People's Republic of Korea would be. And the present-day reality, briefly glimpsed through the windows of our coach? The planet's surface is decorated with mirror squares, so that you half expect to see John Travolta in white suit strut his stuff beneath it. But the Bee Gees aren't big in North Korea and the mirrors have long since lost their shine. Across the Pyongyang basin a high mist or low cloud clung to the surface of the earth – nothing like as acrid as the pollution in Beijing, but gloomy nevertheless – and the effect of the great planet not shining was of a future gone to the grave.