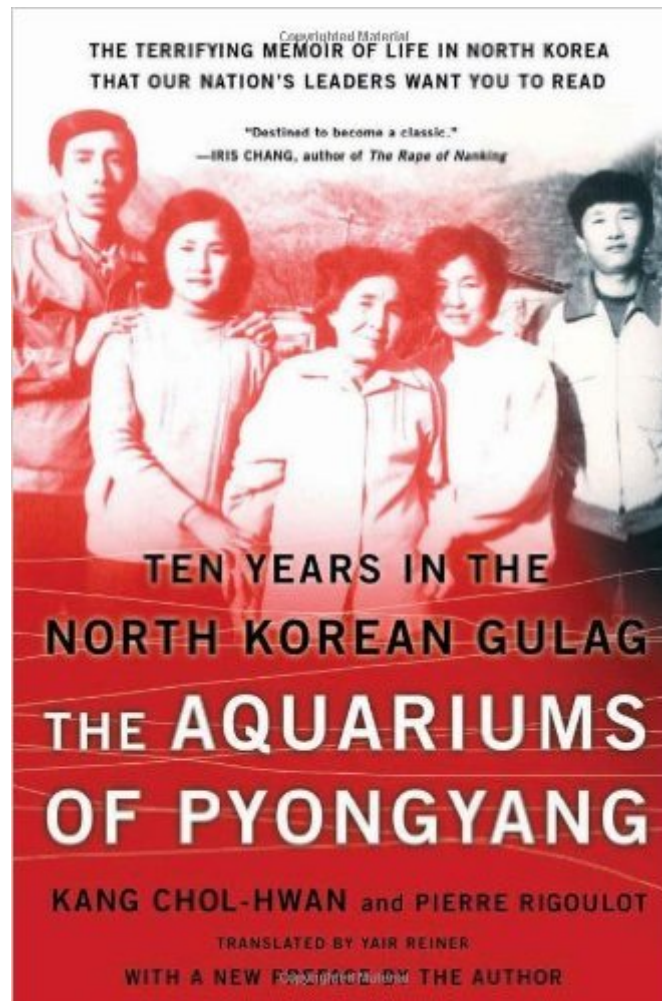


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The Aquariums Of Pyongyang: Ten Years In The North Korean Gulag



Synopsis

North Korea is today one of the last bastions of hard-line Communism. Its leaders have kept a tight grasp on their one-party regime, quashing any nascent opposition movements and sending all suspected dissidents to its brutal concentration camps for "re-education." Kang Chol-hwan is the first survivor of one of these camps to escape and tell his story to the world, documenting the extreme conditions in these gulags and providing a personal insight into life in North Korea. Part horror story, part historical document, part memoir, part political tract, this record of one man's suffering gives eyewitness proof to an ongoing sorrowful chapter of modern history. New edition with a new preface by the author.

Book Information

Paperback: 238 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; unknown edition (August 24, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465011047

ISBN-13: 978-0465011049

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.6 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (267 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Other reviewers have already noted the importance of this book in documenting the pervasive pattern and Kafkaesque quality of human rights violations in North Korea, so I shall concentrate instead on what other help this book offers for penetrating the veil of secrecy in which P'yongyang wraps itself. In the past decade or so, there has been an explosion of Western interest in North Korea that has contributed substantially to a better understanding of P'yongyang's policy priorities and problems. Of particular note in this regard are two publications: "North Korea: Through the Looking Glass," an elegant and balanced study published by the Brookings Institute, and "Kim Il-song's North Korea," which presents the meticulously-detailed research undertaken by Helen Louise Hunter while she was still with the CIA. Both of these publications benefitted from the exploitation of defector information, but their homogenized findings still lack a sense of ground truth,

and it is in this regards that Kang Chol-hwan's account of his life in North Korea is so valuable apart from its obvious importance on the human rights front. "Aquariums of Pyongyang" provides a considerable body of anecdotal information that documents several trends which, North Korean government pronouncements make clear, are of increasing concern to the central government. These trends are rising hooliganism, especially on the part of youth gangs; rampant corruption and bribery in nearly all sectors of society; and a surprising underground use of currency (not always North Korean) in an economy that has traditionally been described as non-monetarized.

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