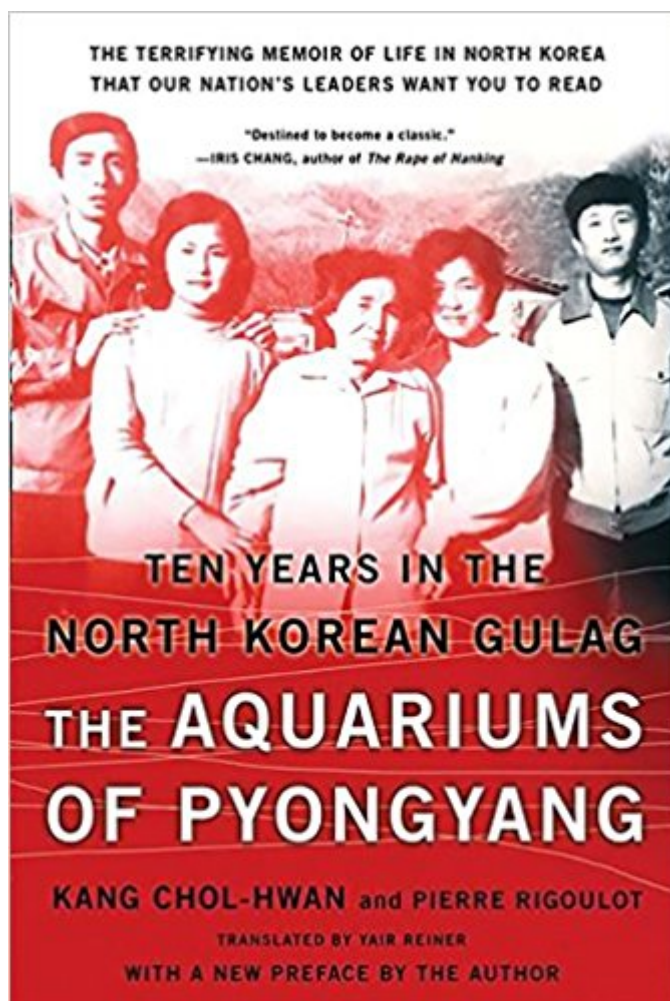


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# The Aquariums Of Pyongyang: Ten Years In The North Korean Gulag



## 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 Part horror story, part historical document, part memoir, part political tract, this record of one man's suffering gives eyewitness proof to an ongoing sorrowful chapter of modern history.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: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.2 inches

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

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 287 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #48,129 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 in [Books > History > Asia > Korea > North](#) #40 in [Books > Travel > Asia > General](#) #52 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Artists, Architects & Photographers](#)

## Customer Reviews

North Korea is among the most opaque nations on earth, its regime noted for repression and for the personality cult of its father and son leaders, the late Kim Il Sung and his successor, Kim Jong Il. Kang Chol-hwan draws from firsthand experience in explaining the repression. After the division of North and South Korea, Kang's family returned to North Korea from Japan, where his grandparents had emigrated in the 1930s and where his grandfather had amassed a fortune and his grandmother became a committed Communist. They were fired with idealism and committed to building an edenic nation. Instead, the family was removed without trial to a remote concentration camp, apparently because the grandfather was suspected of counter-revolutionary tendencies. Kang Chol-hwan was nine years old when imprisoned at the Yodok camp in 1977. Over the next ten years, he endured inhumane conditions and deprivations, including an inadequate diet

(supplemented by frogs and rats), regular beatings, humiliations and hard labor. Inexplicably released in 1987, the author states that the only lesson his imprisonment had "pounded into me was about man's limitless capacity to be vicious." Kang's memoir is notable not for its literary qualities, but for the immediacy and drama of the personal testimony. The writing, as translated by Reiner, is unadorned but serviceable, a style suited to presenting one man's account of a brutalized childhood. Kang now lives in South Korea, where he is a journalist; his co-author Rigoulot was a contributor to *The Black Book of Communism*. Together, they have added a chapter to the tales of horror that have come out of Asia in recent years. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Most readers know of the politically bleak and economically disastrous history of North Korea. This affecting and directly written memoir will help make that history personal and specific. Kang, who escaped from North Korea in 1992 and now lives in Seoul, writes with the help of Rigoulot, editor of *The Black Book of Communism* (LJ 11/1/99). They tell the story of the Kang family, who became prosperous members of the Korean community in Japan in the 1930s but returned to North Korea out of sympathy in the 1960s. At first they lived comparatively well, but soon they ran afoul of paranoid political repression and became one of the many victims of the Korean prison work camps. The details of the gulag are depressingly familiar from memoirs of other Stalinist regimes, but this work is nonetheless important to record and witness. Charles W. Hayford, Northwestern Univ., Evanston, IL Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Beautifully written account of the horrors of a North Korean concentration camp. Not only do you learn of the personal trials of this young man, but the book contains a summary of how North Korea became North Korea. This is the type of account that needs to come out to expose such a reclusive country and their insane human rights violations. This account is from a man who did not start out in the North Korean concentration camps, but rather was sent there when he was a young boy. If you're interested in his account, I would also recommend reading "Escape from Camp 14", which is an account from a man born in a North Korean camp.

Very well-written account (as memoirs go) of a man's life in North Korea---and life as a prisoner in a concentration camp, from the age of 9 yrs-old to 19 yrs-old. I've read a few other books about North Korea ("This is Paradise!" and "Nothing to Envy"), and this was probably my favorite (although the

others---especially "Nothing to Envy", are good too). It's not just a true-life survival, but also contains valuable insights and perceptions. I think everyone, from time to time, should read such accounts, in order to be reminded of the horrors of unconstrained, limitless government. It could happen anywhere where the citizens let down their guard and put too much trust and power in the Ruling Class.

As a person who is interested in both the Korean Peninsula (my sister-in-law is Korean) and the history of communism, this book provided valuable insights. I came to the book with a basic, working knowledge of life in communist countries and life in concentration/hard labor camps; this book adds to that knowledge by painting a vivid picture of life in "The Hermit Kingdom". While other reviewers have criticized the flow of the story, the language/syntax, the author's difficulty in adjusting to life in the South (as if it would be easy to go from living in a Stalinist regime to a democracy) and the fact that the book isn't a comprehensive expose of the North Korean camp system (maybe he could have done this if he had stuck around to get arrested for listening to South Korean radio broadcasts), the strength of this work is its readability, the descriptions of life in Pyongyang before the arrest, the ordeal at Yodok, the escape from the North and travels through China before arriving in Seoul, and the author's heartfelt concern for his family and the country that he had to leave behind in order to tell his story to the world. I don't think the author's intention was to win a Pulitzer Prize, but rather to alert the world of the human tragedy taking place north of the 38th Parallel.

I am fascinated and horrified by North Korea. This story is unbelievable but one that had to be told. Only by educating others can the people of North Korea ever have a chance of living a human life. Please read. Please share. And if you ever have the chance, please help anyone who has managed to escape the horrors that are North Korea.

This story comes off as being quite authentic. The author tells the majority of the story from the first person point of view. There are obvious things which he didn't witness such as his family's history prior to their move from Japan to North Korea, but these are only for background information. Everything about this book reveals how desensitized Kang became due to his upbringing, at least while he was in the camp. He explains how he was able to adapt and overcome. He pointed out how undevoted to the cause the security agents in the camp were, the soldiers, and other various officials in the North Korea government. Regardless, all people lived in fear of either their superiors,

their friends who were often snitches, and their minders. Kang also displays the complete and total breakdown of the North's distribution and rationing system, the birth of an illicit market economy and the rampant corruption in the Stalinist-type system. When Kang speaks as a witness of camp 15, and says there are certainly much worse camps, it is terrifying to know that people at this very moment are still enduring what he and his family endured. Kang must feel some ambivalence towards his decision to flee the country after being released, as his family and particularly his sister have allegedly been sent back. It is very possible that his sister was condemned to the section of the prison for the un-redeemables, in other words, those who are sentenced to work to death on secret government programs. The worst part about the entire system is that guilt by association (which really was the reason his family was put away in the first place), is the norm. His entire family was put away for their grandfather's alleged political crimes. Nobody knows what happened to him. Hopefully Kang's story will have an effect for the good, and Kim Jong-un will be able to make much needed market reforms. Even if NK reaches the point of China, things will have improved one hundred fold.

North Korea has always fascinated me as a subject, probably due to its cultivated air of secrecy. This is an interesting portrayal of daily life in the hermit kingdom and their notorious work camps. It's an easy read and just the description of life outside the camps was worth the price of admission. There were honestly parts of this book that seemed so far fetched they sounded like something out of 1984 or Animal Farm, it's unimaginable that this was inflicted upon real people. Definitely worth checking out if this is a subject that interests you.

It gives a very good idea about how North Korea works, how the people are under constant surveillance, and how any minor mistakes can cost you years in a forced labour camp... is really depressing knowing that this kind of places still exists in the 21st century. However, the book is not so impactful as for example 'First They Killed My Father' all in all it is a good book to know about world facts, but not so exciting (not in a happy sense of course) as it could be...

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