

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89778-5 - North Korea: Markets and Military Rule

Hazel Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: North Korea: politics, economy and society

North Korea is mad, bad and sad.¹ The government is uniquely evil, malevolent and belligerent. The North Koreans are planning to fire missiles armed with nuclear bombs on Alaska. North Koreans are politically indoctrinated robots whose highest ambition is for their children to serve the fatherland in a life of endless privation and unsmiling devotion to a God-like figure in the person of the state leader, Chairman of the National Defence Commission, Kim Jong Un.

The conception of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK – more commonly known as North Korea) as so far off the planet that it might as well be in outer space prevails in almost any report about North Korea in the so-called quality press from round the world. This is despite the fact that many of the claims about North Korea are as bizarre and illogical as the picture they are supposed to portray. There are over 24 million North Koreans – do they really all think the same? The dominance of the 'conventional wisdom' on North Korea drowns other perspectives to the extent that it would be surprising if the average, reasonably well-informed member of the public did not automatically view North Korea as alien and inexplicable.

Yet North Korea is far from unique and not a very difficult country to explain. North Korea has an authoritarian government that rules over an economically struggling society. North Korea is not a pleasant society to live in if you are poor, old, ill-connected, religious and/or a political dissident. Should North Koreans be brave enough or foolish enough to engage in political criticism of the government, they face brutal treatment, including imprisonment and internal exile.

North Korea, like many other countries in the early twenty-first century, is undergoing a transition from socialism to capitalism.² This

¹ The reference here is to Hazel Smith, 'Bad, Mad, Sad or Rational Actor: Why the "Securitisation" Paradigm makes for Poor Policy Analysis of North Korea', *International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 3, July 2000, pp. 593–617.

² The book expands on cause and consequence of marketisation from Chapter 8 onwards. A good summary of economic transformation is provided in Phillip H. Park (ed.), *The*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89778-5 - North Korea: Markets and Military Rule

Hazel Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

fitful and somewhat reluctant process nevertheless represents a very profound transformation of society. The country's economy is irreversibly marketised even though the government's political philosophy and rhetoric hangs on to some vestiges of its foundational socialist rhetoric. As in many poorly functioning states, North Korea's leaders struggle to maintain authority and legitimacy as they continue to rule over a disillusioned population, tired of political rhetoric and economic hardship. Externally, the government faces a new, hostile world in which communist authoritarian states in one camp and capitalist authoritarian states in the other are no longer protected by the bipolar division of the world led by the former Soviet Union and the United States.

The pivotal moment of social and economic change in North Korea was the catastrophic famine of the mid-1990s. Individuals, families and social groups learned to look after themselves as the government could no longer guarantee a living wage or reliable food supplies. The spontaneous activity of the population created a marketised economy 'from below' where the price of goods and services became determined by the relationship between supply and demand. Internationally determined market prices replaced government-dictated prices as the foundation for all economic transactions. Many of these transactions took place through non-state channels and even when state mechanisms were utilised, price and supply of goods could no longer be controlled by the government. From the late 1990s onwards, a gamut of market operations, some legal, some illegal, some in-between, together provided the main source of supply of food and other goods for most North Koreans.

Post-famine marketisation 'from below' did not produce political liberalisation nor did it result in the emergence of an organised political opposition. The struggle for economic survival, combined with authoritarian politics that savagely repressed political dissent, meant that North Koreans did not have the time, energy or opportunity to engage in politics or protest. Individuals made the rational choice. Regime change activity was risky and much less likely to achieve transformation of daily life compared to the marginal improvements that could be gained by engaging in 'grey market' activity. Everyday lives of North Koreans became increasingly detached from a government that publicly professed arcane ideologies about self-reliance or fighting imperialism and whose priority was regime survival through the development of nuclear weapons.

Dynamics of Change in North Korea: An Institutional Perspective (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publications, 2009).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89778-5 - North Korea: Markets and Military Rule

Hazel Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The focus of the book

3

The seamless dynastic succession from founding president Kim Il Sung to his son Kim Jong Il in 1994 and to his son, Kim Jong Un in 2011 belies the fact that North Koreans aged up to about 30 have grown to adulthood in an economically and socially very different world from that of their parents and grandparents. The Kim Il Sungist era is as historically distant to young North Koreans today as the colonial period was to their parents who grew up after the liberation from Japan in 1945.

The focus of the book

The aim of this book is to show how and why social, economic and political change took place in North Korean society since the now well-known external and internal shocks of the early and mid-1990s.³ This book is a new venture although I have discussed many of its themes in previous work published in monographs, edited books, scholarly articles, policy reports for international organisations and governments, and media outlets.⁴

³ Studies that use substantive data to interrogate aspects of economic and social change in the DPRK include Nicholas Eberstadt and Judith Banister, *The Population of North Korea* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992); Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Suk Lee, 'Food Shortages and Economic Institutions in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea', doctoral dissertation, Department of Economics, University of Warwick, January 2003); Hazel Smith, *Hungry for Peace: International Security, Humanitarian Assistance and Social Change in North Korea* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005); on political transformation see Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁴ For selection see Hazel Smith, *Food Security and Agricultural Production* (Muscatine, IA/Berlin: Stanley Foundation/German Council on Foreign Relations, June 2005); Smith, *Hungry for Peace*; Hazel Smith, 'The Disintegration and Reconstitution of the State in the DPRK', in Simon Chesterman, Michael Ignatieff and Ramesh Thakur (eds.), *Making States Work* (Tokyo: United Nations Press, 2005), pp. 167–92; Hazel Smith 'North Koreans in China: Sorting Fact from Fiction', in Tsuneo Akaha and Anna Vassilieva (eds.), *Crossing National Borders: Human Migration Issues in Northeast Asia* (Tokyo: United Nations Press, 2005), pp. 165–90; Hazel Smith *Caritas and the DPRK – Building on 10 Years of Experience* (Hong Kong and Rome: Caritas, 2006); Hazel Smith 'Analysing Change in the DPR Korea', working paper (Bern: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – East Asia Division, November 2006); Hazel Smith (ed.), *Reconstituting Korean Security: A Policy Primer* (Tokyo: United Nations Press, 2007); Hazel Smith, 'North Korean Shipping: A Potential for WMD Proliferation?', *Asia-Pacific Issues*, No. 87, February 2009; Hazel Smith, 'North Korea: Market Opportunity, Poverty and the Provinces', *New Political Economy*, Vol. 14, No. 3, June 2009, pp. 231–56; Hazel Smith, 'North Korea's Security Perspectives', in Andrew T. H. Tan (ed.), *East and South-East Asia: International Relations and Security Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 121–32; Hazel Smith, 'Crimes Against Humanity? Unpacking the North Korean Human Rights Debate', in Christine Hong and Hazel Smith (eds.), *Critical Asian Studies, Reframing North Korean Human Rights*, Vol. 46, No. 1, March 2014, pp. 127–43.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89778-5 - North Korea: Markets and Military Rule

Hazel Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

The book aims to provide an empirically supported analysis of how and why the economy and society of North Korea has been transformed in the post-Cold War era, while the government has hardly changed its political trajectory. This is not therefore a book about North Korea's foreign policy, international relations or historical origins, although I do review these topics in the context of the overall explanation of social, economic and political change.⁵ The key questions at the heart of this investigation are 'how and why has the radical dissonance between everyday life and government pronouncements and policy come about and what are the implications for the future of North Korea?'

In this book, I challenge the media mythology that the DPRK is an unknown quantity and aim to shift the debate on from that based on tired and unhelpful stereotyping that characterises so much of the analysis of North Korean politics, economics and society.⁶ This includes assumptions that the government controls every action of every human being in North Korea; that North Korean society never changes; that North Korea is nothing more than a monolithic aggregation of persons with identical interests and outlooks; and that the country cannot be studied

⁵ For a representative selection of writings on foreign policy and international relations see Marion Creekmore, Jr., *A Moment of Crisis: Jimmy Carter, the Power of a Peace-maker, and North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006); Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: US Policy and the Two Koreas* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Leon O. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton University Press, 1998); Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005). For well-researched and authoritative historical analyses see for example Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. I: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945–1947* (Seoul: Yuksabipungsa, 2002); Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. II: The Roaring of the Cataract 1947–1950* (Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990); Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (London: Warner Books, 1997).

⁶ Including the light-hearted and perhaps therefore forgivable anecdotal narrative of Michael Breen, *Kim Jong Il: North Korea's Dear Leader: Who he Is, What he Wants, What to Do about Him* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2004); the more serious account of the North Korean famine by Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001) in which the author makes claims about famine figures that are not substantiated by way of the data; and the adjectival, apocalyptic prose in Nicholas Ebertstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington, DC: The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Press, 1999) in which North Korea has (excerpt taken at random from the book) 'a fearsome arsenal of weapons of mass destruction'; the government presides over a 'starving, decaying state'; its weaponry has 'killing force'; the country has 'extortionist diplomacy'. The government's plans will 'only provide more of the ghastly, deepening twilight in which the regime is already enveloped' (pp. 21–2).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89778-5 - North Korea: Markets and Military Rule

Hazel Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in the same way as any other country.⁷ These clichés are factually misleading. No state or society is ever homogeneous or unchanging and no government, however effective, can control every aspect of its citizens' lives. Where the stereotypes are most misleading, however, is in the myopia about the dramatic social and economic changes that have constituted the fundamental fact of life for every North Korean for the past quarter century. The most basic tenet of social science is that all societies change – even if their governments do not. One conventional assumption about North Korea is that because political philosophy has not changed much since the creation of the state, then North Korea must be a society that does not change or in which social change is insignificant. In North Korea, where people experienced cataclysmic social upheaval during and after the famine of the early 1990s, the assumption of a static society is especially untenable, verging on the fatuous.

North Korea can be compared fairly straightforwardly to other Asian societies, societies in transition from communism to capitalism, and other poor societies. The book shows that the DPRK can be understood through conventional approaches to knowledge, using conventional or 'positivist' notions of social science that seek to assess factual data through a logical evaluation process.⁸ The further premise is that North Korea can be understood best through situating the contemporary social and political environment in a historical and cultural context. This historical framing is crucial in explaining the commonalities with South Korea as well as the major differences between the two countries.

In policy terms, this work is underpinned by an old-fashioned liberal trope: better analysis may produce better policy.

North Koreans as agents of change

In this book, I show how and why the society and economics of North Korea changed from a command economy to one that is marketised and in which the population became more and more disassociated from their government. I demonstrate how the political system became delegitimised as the government continually failed to deliver on its promises and as the people of North Korea became aware of the fact that they were poor and their neighbours prosperous. I also show how the government was unable to accommodate the socio-economic transformation that took place in North Korea 'from below' and how it failed to provide

⁷ For an exception and for analytically acute comments on social life see Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea* (Jefferson, MO: McFarland, 2007).

⁸ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, fourth edition (Oxford University Press, 2012).

6 Introduction

credible, effective and sustainable policies to provide secure futures for the population. North Korea is not a democratic state but, like all societies, is made up of different social and political groups with different interests, values, histories and opportunities. I explain and show the heterogeneity of experience of North Koreans as defined by social class, occupation, geographical provenance, gender and age.

This book unpacks the caricatures that have become the conventional ‘wisdom’ about North Korea, including that of all North Koreans as helpless targets of an all-powerful, omniscient government. From this perspective North Koreans are only either villains or victims. An aim of the book is to introduce North Koreans as the complicated subjects of history that they are. The ethical and political focus is on the potential of North Korean people to make their own history, separately from those in charge. North Koreans, in other words, are the agents of change in North Korea.

The data

The book draws on my twenty-five years of research on North Korea that is in turn very largely based on data from publicly accessible sources, including reports from governments, international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). I have been aided by the perhaps surprising propensity of the North Korean government to translate and publish huge amounts of books, reports and newspaper articles into English. I obtained these in the DPRK over the years but these days some specialist importers are marketing this material on websites and at Korean studies conferences. The total control of publishing by the government implies that all of these publications convey an official line of some sort and therefore this data has helped to provide representative data about government perspectives on various aspects of history, culture, politics, society and economics over time.

Thousands of reports on different aspects of North Korean society have been published and circulated by international organisations, as well as various governments and NGOs that have worked in the DPRK since the start of the on-going food and economic crisis in the 1990s.⁹

⁹ See references throughout the book. NGO sources, for example, include field reports such as Action Contre la Faim, *Nutritional Programme: North Hamgyong Province DPR of Korea, November 1999* (Pyongyang: Action Contre la Faim, 1999). DPRK government data is used if the information and analysis is undertaken with supervision and collaboration of international organisations, for example, EU, UNICEF and WFP in partnership with the Government of DPRK, *Nutrition Survey of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea* (Rome/Pyongyang: WFP, 1998); Central Bureau of Statistics, *Report on*

Valuable reporting comes from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the European Union (EU), the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Caritas Internationalis, among others. These data resources are surprisingly under-used, even by the organisations themselves. The UNDP, for instance, categorises the DPRK as one of the few states for which there is insufficient reliable data to offer any but the most basic global comparisons of socio-economic development.¹⁰ At the same time, since 1995, the UNDP has acted as the coordinator of a huge volume of

the DPRK Nutrition Assessment 2002 (Pyongyang: Central Bureau of Statistics, 20 November 2002); Central Bureau of Statistics, *DPRK 2004 Nutrition Assessment* (Pyongyang: Central Bureau of Statistics, Institute of Child Nutrition, February 2005). A wealth of usable data is contained in the major inter-governmental agency reports, several thousands of which are freely available on the 'Reliefweb' site hosted by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) as well as on individual UN agency websites. See [http://reliefweb.int/country/prk?f\[0\]=field_country%3A74](http://reliefweb.int/country/prk?f[0]=field_country%3A74), accessed 29 May 2014. For examples see International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), *Upland Food Security Project, Report of Interim Evaluation Mission Agricultural Component* (Pyongyang, April 2008). See also the almost twice yearly FAO/WFP food and crop assessment mission reports since 1995; for example FAO/WFP, *Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Special Report* (Rome: FAO/WFP, 8 December 2008); FAO/WFP, *Crop and Food Supply Security Assessment Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Special Report* (Rome: FAO/WFP, 12 November 2012). The WFP webpage on the DPR Korea hosts a number of extensive reports, including the 2012 national nutrition survey, which the WFP records as 'the result of a joint collaboration between DPRK Government, involving the Central Bureau of Statistics, the Child Nutrition Institute, the Ministry of Public Health and the National Coordination Committee as well as WHO, WFP and UNICEF'. See www.wfp.org/node/3498/4564/402630#, accessed 26 July 2013. See UNOCHA, *Report* (Pyongyang; UNOCHA, 6 August 2002); UNDP, *Report of the First Thematic Round Table Conference for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Geneva: UNDP, 28–9 May 1998); UNDP, *Report of the Thematic Round Table Conference for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Geneva: UNDP, June 2000); UNICEF, *Background Situation Analysis on DPRK* (Pyongyang: UNICEF, April 1998); UNICEF, *Situation Analysis of Women and Children in the DPRK* (Pyongyang: UNICEF, 1999); UNICEF, *DPRK Social Statistics* (Pyongyang: UNICEF, 1999); Central Bureau of Statistics/UNICEF, *The Democratic People's Republic of Korea Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Final Report 2009* (Pyongyang: CBS, 2010); United Nations, *DPR Korea Common Country Assessment 2002* (Pyongyang: UNOCHA, February 2003); WFP, 'Emergency Operation DPR Korea No. 5959.02, Emergency Assistance for Vulnerable Groups' (Pyongyang: WFP, 2000); WFP/FAO/UNICEF, *Rapid Food Security Assessment Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Bangkok: WFP/FAO/UNICEF, 12 March 2011), available on www.wfp.org/content/democratic-people-s-republic-korea-wfpfaounicef-rapid-food-security-assessment-march-2011, accessed 25 July 2013.

¹⁰ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World* (New York: UNDP, 2004).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89778-5 - North Korea: Markets and Military Rule

Hazel Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

research undertaken by the United Nations in North Korea, some of which it has published itself and some of which it has disseminated, including very detailed evaluations of the nutrition, food and agriculture sectors.

South Korean analysis and data provide another key resource. South Korean analysts and scholars have been, however, periodically constrained by domestic politics and law, which prohibited, by criminal sanctions, any form of activity that could be inferred as sympathetic to the North. The North–South rapprochement of the 2000s eased these constraints but from the late 2000s, the renewed confrontational environment on the Korean peninsula served to inhibit, partly through self-censorship, an efflorescence of research on North Korea.

I have been informed in the writing of this book by many hundreds of conversations with North Koreans in and out of North Korea. I have visited the DPRK regularly since 1990 and lived and worked there for nearly two years between 1998 and 2001. I cannot cite these sources because I do not have their authorisation to use these conversations as material for this book and to a great extent my observations are just that; my observations. In social science that doesn't count as verified data. I have not, however, refrained from using some of this background data in my analysis if I could not provide an alternative source and if I thought the information was important to the reader. I have tried to minimise these interventions as I am conscious that this could make me guilty of the failings I criticise in other work on the DPRK. To as great an extent as I can, however, I have tried to guard against bias and to ensure that no large generalisations are drawn from isolated or unsubstantiated data.

The book does not rely on unsourced leaks from intelligence agencies, defectors and foreign visitors although it does occasionally refer to these sources. Intelligence agencies clearly have multiple agendas, not all of which include transparent and objective analysis. I do not develop an analysis based on defector information even though defector accounts help us understand aspects of North Korean society about which outside observers have next to no first-hand experience. Defector accounts, for example, provide the major source of information on the penal system, which North Korean governments closed to external scrutiny.¹¹

North Korea's defector/escapee/migrant community had historically only been given a mediated voice via South Korean intelligence agencies, foreign and South Korean non-governmental organisations and co-writers

¹¹ Chol-Hwan Kang and Pierre Rigoulot, translated by Yair Reiner, *Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89778-5 - North Korea: Markets and Military Rule

Hazel Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The data

9

from abroad.¹² Recently, however, the self-organisation of North Koreans in Seoul and the publication of unmediated blogs and writings by North Koreans are offering far more useful insights into the nuances of North Korean politics than we have seen before in the public arena.¹³ Professional analysis and interviewing of North Korean defectors also has produced useful factual information but unfortunately this material jostles in the public arena with unscientific ‘surveys’ of defectors as well as anecdotal, unverifiable and sensationalist ‘information’ that is regularly picked up by global media anxious to increase their circulation.¹⁴ Defector anecdotes bring ‘colour’ to reporting but because this book is attempting to provide generalizable analysis, these sources are for the most part eschewed.

I do not rely on the plethora of first-hand accounts and trip reports from individuals who have visited the DPRK and stayed there for periods of up to several years. At best, these inform the reader about the author’s personal experiences and draw directly from direct observation and qualified comment – resisting claims to overarching knowledge; the weaker ones provide derivative accounts of Korean history cut and pasted from newspaper and other sources that are sometimes not credited.¹⁵ Accounts by former diplomats and officials provide a sub-genre

¹² Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 225–55.

¹³ The well-informed blog *New Focus International* aims for an international audience and bases its news and comment on a network of correspondents inside the DPRK. It was established and is run by former DPRK counter-intelligence officer, Jang Jin-Sung. See <http://newfocusintl.com/breaking-north-koreans-ordered-return-state-postings>, accessed 28 May 2014.

¹⁴ A good example of the use of defector-based information that is careful to acknowledge the limitation of these sources and to triangulate information from defectors with other data is Gary Samore, *North Korea’s Weapons Programmes: A Net Assessment* (London: Macmillan Palgrave, 2004). Another example of professional research based on defector surveys is Byung-Yeon Kim and Dongho Song, ‘The Participation of North Korean Households in the Informal Economy: Size, Determinants, and Effect’, *Seoul Journal of Economics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 2008, pp. 361–85.

¹⁵ The memoir by the British citizen Michael Harrold, who spent seven years between 1987 and 1994 working as a translator in the DPRK, is somewhat disappointing as it fails to offer anything other than the most minimal observations of North Korean society, remaining focused on the expatriate community experiences of life in the country. See Michael Harrold, *Comrades and Strangers: Behind the Closed Doors of North Korea* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, and 2004). A book containing some nice vignettes based on visits to the DPRK is Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006). A slight but illuminating account and less sensational than the title would suggest, is Nanchu with Xing Hang, *In North Korea: An American Travels through an Imprisoned Nation* (London: McFarland and Company, 2003). A very engaging account of life in Pyongyang that has verisimilitude in respect of the day-to-day life of the now hundreds of Westerners who have lived in Pyongyang for periods ranging from a few months to

10 Introduction

of their own and these are often, perhaps surprisingly, absent of crude partisanship and can provide valuable empirical insights into daily life in Pyongyang.¹⁶

A roadmap through the book

This book is written for a broad audience. It is not theory-laden nor does it presume any knowledge about North Korea or social science concepts. For the scholar or student, however, the book is fairly extensively footnoted. The historical chapters provide familiar material for a reader who is a historian of Korea but they are necessary for my explanation of contemporary politics given the historically laden conceptions of national identity that shape contemporary North Korean politics. They also provide information for the reader whose main interest is to understand more recent North Korean history but who may be unfamiliar with the historical context.

Chapter 1 shows that ‘common knowledge’ assumptions need to be examined critically as they provide a distorted and misleading picture of North Korea and North Koreans in the twenty-first century. Chapter 2 shows how historically referenced understandings of ethnic and national identity, including ideas that Korean people share a common past, a common culture and a common nation, are naturalised by citizens of North Korea and South Korea. These politically powerful conceptions are shared by leaders of the two Koreas, even as they disagree as to how to reach a common future and a re-unified state. This chapter also introduces the political, economic and social distinctiveness of the northern part of the peninsula, even prior to the partition of Korea in 1945. North Korean historiography often downplays northern distinctiveness in order to stress the official line of the homogeneity of the Korean people although, at the same time, claims are often made about a supposed historically based northern superiority over South Korea.

The next six chapters evaluate the rise and fall of Kim Il Sungism as an integrated system of authoritarian politics whose ambition was

four or five years is the beautifully drawn cartoon book by Guy DeLisle, *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (Montreal: L’Association, 2005).

¹⁶ An account that remains grounded in observation and guided by analytical acuity is J. E. Hoare and Susan Pares, *North Korea in the 21st Century: An Interpretative Guide* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2005). Erik Cornell provides a fascinating account of his time as a Swedish diplomat in the DPRK; his musings on the theory of Marx and Lenin are less successful. See Erik Cornell, *North Korea under Communism: Report of an Envoy to Paradise* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002). See also John Everard, *Only Beautiful, Please: A British Diplomat in North Korea* (Stanford, CA: Asia/Pacific Research Center, Division of The Institute for International Studies, 2012).