

**“The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future”  
by Victor Cha, Krys Lee  
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Victor Cha can't easily forget the desolation he encountered on his first visit to North Korea. “As the plane taxied on the tarmac, there was no flight traffic to be seen,” he writes in “The Impossible State.” The fields were “barren and gray,” and during the long drive to his lodgings, he saw only one tractor; he soon discovered that there was no BlackBerry service to distract him from the diplomatic mission he was on for the George W. Bush White House. Officially he was in Pyongyang to press for the return of the remains of prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action from the Korean War. While the elusive country reveals little of itself to visitors who are carefully monitored by minders, Cha delivers an up-close, insightful portrait of this “land of contradictions.”

Cha's extensive years writing on U.S. policy in Asia for a variety of journals and his service on the National Security Council in the Bush administration give him a rare perspective on North Korea's past and present. He draws upon this expertise to assert his central thesis that the state newly installed leader Kim Jong-Un has inherited is “not sustainable.”

In order to understand the future of North Korea, Cha begins with its relatively more prosperous past during the Cold War years when the country had reliable heating and electricity and a growing high-tech industry bolstered by the patronage of China and the Soviet Union. In contrast, South Korea struggled under a corrupt government and poverty, remaining primarily an agrarian society.

Cha explains how Korean social structures dating from the pre-colonial period and lingering effects of the Korean War influence both North and the South. He also traces how North Korea came to be a dynastic nation. Of note is Cha's astute analysis of how the state, which is nearly a synonym for the ruling family, used a “loving mother” iconography to create an environment where citizens regard their leader with the reverence and respect accorded their own mothers. The state manipulated this filial piety, which is especially strong in Asian countries, to help pave the path for family succession.

For a reclusive nation, North Korea has garnered a lot of news coverage, largely for its failures and hardships: its nuclear escapades, years of famine that killed more than a million and the constant stream of defectors have kept journalists busy for years. Cha outlines five bad decisions that have impaired North Korea's development: valuing ideology over economics, losing Chinese and Soviet support, institutionalizing illegal arms sales and drug production and trade, doling out small freedoms to the people and then retracting them, and relying so heavily on aid from other countries that it has become permanently dependent on them.

In a section titled “The Worst Place on Earth,” Cha movingly documents the 1990s famine and the country's appalling human-rights record. The horrors are staggering: surgeries and amputations conducted without any anesthesia in a collapsed health system, labor camps where prisoners are routinely tortured and reduced to foraging for bugs, bark and beetles. Cha also takes China to task for repatriating North Korean refugees who make it across the border, knowing that severe punishment and, in some cases, death, await them on their return. The fear of repatriation is great; a few North Korean teenagers I know tried to commit suicide when caught within the Chinese border.

Cha skillfully weaves personal stories into the larger narrative of North Korean life. The narrative doesn't quite rise to the heights reached by Barbara Demick in “Nothing to Envy,” her account of the lives of six North Koreans over 15 years, but it is more comprehensive and, in its quiet way, just as moving.

Less skillfully handled are the nuclear issue and North Korea's relationship with its neighbors. Cha's insider perspective betrays him here. Though he captures well the tightrope spectacle of diplomacy and North Korea's determination to persist in its nuclear mission, he repeats incidents and details in overlapping, wordy chapters. In the same vein, he repeatedly praises Bush's support of the North Korean human rights movement.

Unfortunately, beyond the passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 and public gestures of sympathy, the United States has not provided as much economic and social support for defectors as South Korea and some other nations have. America is also well-known for providing little support to defectors upon their arrival to the United States, which leads to spiraling social problems and, in some cases, suicide. This wider view is absent from Cha's account. Not even a passing nod goes to the NGOs and human rights activists who create international campaigns pressing for the release of captured refugees and activists in China, and who risk their lives to shelter refugees and bring them to freedom.

"The Impossible State" is a clearheaded, bold examination of North Korea and its future, even if Cha's sycophantic admiration for and repeated defense of Bush and his administration diminish his achievement. What Cha predicts, in the end, does not bode well for the Orwellian nation of North Korea.