

To a certain extent, all dictatorships are alike. From Stalin's Soviet Union to Mao's China to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, all these regimes had the same trappings: the statues looming over every town square, the portraits hung in every office, the wristwatches with the dictator's face on the dial. But Kim Il-sung, the first Communist leader of North Korea, took the cult of personality to a new level...Kim Il-sung understood the power of religion. His uncle was a Protestant minister in the pre-Communist days when the nation's capital was a vibrant Christian community. Once in power, Kim Il-sung closed the churches, banned the Bible, deported believers, and stole Christian imagery and dogma for the purpose of self-promotion.

Broadcasters would speak of Kim Il-sung or his son, Kim Jong-il, breathlessly, in the manner of a preacher. North Korean newspapers carried tales of supernatural phenomena. Stormy seas were said to be calmed when sailors clinging to a sinking ship sang songs in praise of Kim Il-sung. Their Great Leader caused trees to bloom and snow to melt. If Kim Il-sung was God, then Kim Jong-il was the son of God. Like Jesus Christ, Kim Jong-il's birth was said to have been heralded by a radiant star in the sky and the appearance of a beautiful double rainbow. A swallow descended from heaven to sing of the birth of a "general who will rule the world."

In the futuristic dystopia imagined in his novel *1984* George Orwell wrote of a world where the only color to be found was the propaganda posters. Such is the case in North Korea. Much of the landscape and buildings are gray. But images of Kim Il-Sung are depicted in the vivid poster colors favored by the Socialist Realism style of painting. The Great Leader sits on a bench smiling benevolently at a group of brightly dressed children, crowding around him. Rays of yellow and orange emanate from his face: He is the sun.

Red is reserved for the lettering of the propaganda signs:

**LONG LIVE KIM IL-SUNG.**

**KIM JONG-IL, SUN OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY.**

**WE WILL DO AS THE PARTY TELLS US.**

**WE HAVE NOTHING TO ENVY IN THE WORLD.**

North Korea invites parody. We laugh at the excesses of the propaganda and the gullibility of the people. But consider that their indoctrination began in infancy, during the fourteen-hour days spent in factory day-care centers; that for the subsequent fifty years, every song, film, newspaper article, and billboard was designed to deify Kim Il-sung; that the country was hermetically sealed to keep out anything that might cast doubt on Kim Il-sung's divinity. Who could possibly resist?

Televisions and radios in North Korea were preset so that they can receive only official government channels. Still, the programming was relatively entertaining. Besides the usual speeches of Kim Il-sung, on a typical weeknight you might have sports, concerts, television dramas, and movies produced by Kim Jong-il's film studio.

In every home a framed portrait of Kim Il-sung hung on an otherwise bare wall. People were not permitted to put anything else on that wall, not even pictures of their blood relatives. The North Korean newspapers liked to run “human interest stories” about heroic citizens who lost their lives rescuing the portraits from fire or flood. The Workers’ Party distributed the portraits free of charge along with a white cloth to be used only to clean the portraits. About once a month, inspectors from the Public Standards Police would drop by to check on the cleanliness of the portraits.

Spying on one’s countrymen is something of a national pastime. There were the young vigilantes from the Socialist Youth League. They made sure people weren’t violating the dress code by wearing blue jeans or T-shirts with Roman writing—considered a capitalist indulgence—or wearing their hair too long. The party issued regular edicts saying that men shouldn’t allow the hair on top of their head to grow longer than five centimeters—though an exemption was granted for balding men, who were permitted seven centimeters. If a violation was severe, the offender could be arrested by the Public Standards Police. There were also mobile police units who roamed the streets looking for offenders and had the right to barge into people’s houses without notice. They would look for people who used more than their quota of electricity, a lightbulb brighter than 40 watts, a hot plate, or a rice cooker. The mobile police dropped in after midnight to see if there were any overnight guests who might have come to visit without travel permits. It was a serious offense, even if it was just an out-of-town relative, and much worse if the guest happened to be a lover. Since the country was too poor and the power supply too unreliable for electronic surveillance, state security relied on human intelligence—snitches. The newspapers would occasionally run feature stories about heroic children who ratted out their parents. To be denounced by a neighbor for badmouthing the government was nothing extraordinary. Once a man cracked a joke about Kim Jong-il’s height and was sent away to prison for life.

North Koreans have multiple words for prison. Somebody who commits a minor offense—such as skipping work—might be sent to a detention center operated by the People’s Safety Agency, a low-level police unit, or maybe a labor camp, where the offender would be sentenced to a month or two of hard labor, such as paving a road.

The most notorious prisons are the *kwanliso*—which translates as “control and management places.” These are in fact a colony of labor camps that stretch for miles in the northernmost mountains of the country. Satellite intelligence suggests they house up to 20,000 people. Emulating the Soviet gulag, Kim Il-sung set up the camps shortly after taking power to sweep aside anybody who might challenge his authority—rival politicians, Christian clergyman, Japanese collaborators, somebody caught reading foreign newspapers, a man who cracked a joke about Kim Jong-il’s height. One woman was sent away for writing something politically incorrect in her diary. There are many tales of people who disappear in the night and are never heard from again. Sentences for the *kwanliso* are for life. Children and parents and siblings are often taken away as well to get rid of the “tainted blood.” Little is known about what happens inside the *kwanliso* and few emerge to tell their tales.

## EDUCATION IN NORTH KOREA

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The kindergarten was housed in a single-story concrete building that might have looked grim if not for the iron fence with colorfully painted sunflowers that encircled it and formed an archway over the entrance with the slogan “We are happy.” Kindergarteners did not wear uniforms, so they came to school in a motley assortment of hand-me-downs, often swathed in many layers since there was little heating in the school. Their teacher was surprised by how ragged the children looked. As she helped them off with their outerwear, she peeled layer after layer until the tiny body inside was revealed. When she held their hands in her own, their baby fingers squeezed into fists as tiny as walnuts. These children five-and-six-year-olds looked to her no bigger than three and four-year-olds. They were malnourished. There was a country-wide famine brought about by the leaders of North Korea. But, of course, this was blamed on the Americans.

The school day started at 8:00 AM. As soon as the teacher got the students into their assigned seats, she brought out her accordion. In the classrooms teachers often sang “We Have Nothing to Envy in the World,” which had a singsongy tune as familiar to North Korean children as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

*Our father, we have nothing to envy in the world.  
Our house is within the embrace of the Workers' Party.  
We are all brothers and sisters.  
Even if a sea of fire comes toward us, sweet children do not need to be afraid,  
Our father is here.  
We have nothing to envy in this world.*

Since the students could not read from the Great Leader’s copious works, the teacher would read excerpts aloud. The children were encouraged to repeat key phrases after her in unison. After the ideological training, the lessons moved on to more familiar subjects, but the Great Leader was never far from the children’s minds. Whether they were studying math, science, reading, music, or art, the children were taught to revere the leadership and hate the enemy. For example, a first grade math book contained the following questions:

“Eight boys and nine girls are singing anthems in praise of Kim Il-sung. How many children are singing in total?”

“Three soldiers from the Korean People’s Army killed thirty American soldiers. How many American soldiers were killed by each of them if they all killed an equal number of enemy soldiers?”

One of the songs taught in music class was “Shoot the Yankee Bastards”:

*Our enemies are the American bastards  
Who are trying to take over our beautiful fatherland.  
With guns that I make with my own hands  
I will shoot them. BANG, BANG, BANG.*

Reading primers told stories of children who were beaten, bayoneted, burned, splashed with acid, or thrown into wells by villains who were invariably Christian missionaries, Japanese bastards, or American imperialist bastards. In a popular textbook a young boy was kicked to death by GIs when he refused to shine their shoes. American soldiers were drawn with beakish noses like the Jews in the anti-Semitic cartoons of Nazi Germany.

The children were given the North Korean version of history. The Americans were the incarnation of evil and the South Koreans their pathetic lackeys. They read about how sneering Americans and South Korean soldiers drove their bayonets into the bodies of innocent civilians. Textbooks were full of stories of people burned, crushed, stabbed, shot, and poisoned by the enemy.

The children were never to forget that they owed everything to the national leadership. Like other North Korean children, they didn't celebrate their own birthdays, but those of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. These days were national holidays and they were often the only days people would get meat in their ration packages. Later, after the energy crisis began, these were the only days there was electricity.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What is evil about the society of North Korea?
2. What are some drastic contrasts between North Korea and the United States?
3. What are some parallels between North Korea and *Animal Farm*?
4. Who is North Korea's Snowball?