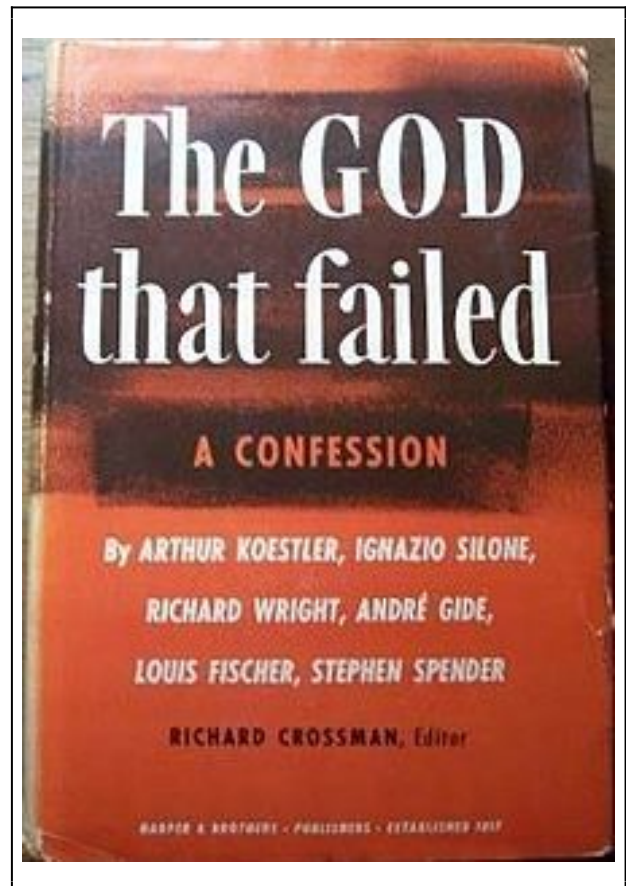


# The Nation (and the Family) That Failed: The Past and Future of North Koreans in Japan

John Lie

Communism – along with socialism and kindred progressive, egalitarian ideals – dominated the intellectual life of much of the world from the mid nineteenth century to the late twentieth century: the long Eurocentric period of modernity. Never mind that much of the non-European world was colonized by European empires and Europe-influenced powers of the United States and Japan: the early counter-colonial and national independence movements and ideologies were almost always inspired by figures and ideals from the west that dominated the rest. It is therefore not surprising that there is more than a family resemblance among the wide variety of anti-colonial, nationalist discourses and parties, west or east, south or north.



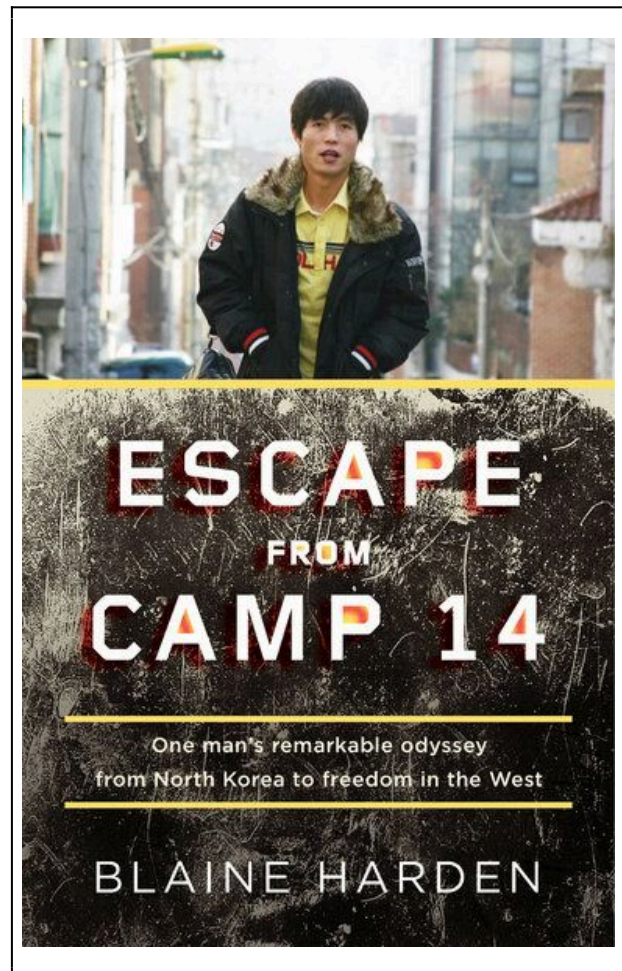
Since the demise of the Soviet Empire, we have witnessed the rapid collapse of leftist ideologies that purported to counter the capitalist hegemony of the west. The dominant discourse of defeat is at once a capitulation to capitalist democracy and a testament of past wrongs: believing not only in the wrong, losing side but also of aiding and abetting the crimes of totalitarian rule. Reflections on one's past allegiance to communism or its ilk, then, partake not only of confession for past wrongs but also of accounting for and explaining away one's erstwhile and illusory ideal. Indeed, it is tantamount to expiating for one's sins. The God

That Failed is an exemplary and paradigmatic text; intellectual luminaries such as André Gide, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, and Richard Wright recount their early faith and fervor in the ideal of communism and their eventual disillusionment and disbelief (Crossman 1949). This discursive framework is fundamentally Christian, even Augustinian. Their youthful enthusiasm – yielding to totalitarian temptation – is superseded by the mature recognition and judgment – accepting capitalist democracy as the best that is possible. Communist apostates everywhere follow the narrative trajectory of youthful enthusiasm and mature renunciation, frequently overlaid by remorse and even guilt for the impudent and sinful folly of youth. It is a simple teleological narrative, painted in black and white.



The simple binaries – capitalism/communism, rational/irrational, mature/juvenile, good/evil –

characterize almost all the post-communist reflections of erstwhile communist adherence, whether collectively or individually. The few exceptions, such as Christa Wolf who sought to recuperate the complexity of East German life under communist rule, are rare and castigated to boot. What then of one of the last redoubts of the former Second World of communism, North Korea? To be sure, the North Korean regime doesn't consider itself to be "communist" – in the dominant North Korean discourse, Soviet-style and Chinese communist models have both failed – but rather a democratic republic under the rule of the Labor Party and its ideology of juche (usually translated as "self-reliance"). Be that as it may, there is no doubt that as of 2016 the Labor Party under Kim Jong-un is in power and there isn't much popular reflection or remorse coming from North Korea save for the case of refugees who have fled the country.



The sheer proliferation of North Korean refugee testimonies points to the brutality of the regime and the horror of everyday life in North Korea. Blaine Harden's *Escape from Camp 14* (2012) was perhaps the first widely read account in English. In spite of the disclosure that the escapee Shin Dong-hyuk has exaggerated, embellished, and possibly prevaricated his account, similar narratives continue to appear. Although there is no point in denying the staggering costs of mismanaged economies and famines or authoritarian rule and human rights abuses, it is difficult to accept uncritically all the premises and pronouncements of the refugees, refracted as they are by South Korean, Christian, American, and other mediating lenses, and replete as they are with obvious political and ideological agendas and schemas. In particular, the highly stylized narrative partakes of the movement from the era of miserable oppression, the period of daring escape, and the newfound freedom. Again, it is not that the broad outline isn't true for many refugees; it's simply questionable that there is nothing of value in the before and nothing of misery in the after. Indeed, the trickle of refugees who return or wish to return to North Korea should give us pause from uncritically accepting and celebrating the dominant discourse on North Korean refugees (McCurry 2014).

The inevitable depiction of oppression, misery, and tragedy – the nightmare that is North Korea – allows no room for anything that may remotely be construed as positive in the regime, past or present. We cannot access the elided past – why, for example, did some, perhaps many, Koreans choose to embrace the North after Liberation? – or the occluded present – why, for instance, do some people in the North continue to exude enthusiasm for the regime? Given the geopolitically fraught nature of North Korea – widely regarded as the most roguish of rogue states – it is not surprising that the discourse is so simplistic, essentialist, and lopsided, especially in South Korea and the

United States (See Ryang 2012). Instead, we might look to North Koreans in Japan. Living in a putatively free society, there is nothing that prevents them from weaving a more complex narrative born of some familiarity with North Korea. Certainly, they don't need to satisfy western journalists and writers who work within the simple ideological scheme of the evil rogue state North Korea, and the narrative of liberation for the refugees.

### North Koreans in Japan

Peoplehood identification is in large part geographical: when one is said to belong to Group X, it is because she or her ancestors hailed from Country X. The usual algorithm doesn't work well for North Koreans in Japan, frequently known by the bizarre term *Zainichi* (meaning roughly "residing in Japan"). The presumed temporary character of Japanese residence is misleading because virtually all *Zainichi* are third-fourth or fifth-generation ethnic Koreans whose ancestors arrived in the Japanese archipelago from the Korean peninsula during the colonial period, usually in the 1920s and 1930s (See Lie 2008; Ryang 1997). More relevant, almost all of them came from the southern part of the Korean peninsula including many from Cheju Island, which all comfortably belong to the nation of South Korea. Put simply, North Korea is not the land of origin for almost all *Zainichi* even if they should identify as North Koreans residing temporarily in Japan. The geographically obvious identification with South Korea was impeded by the overwhelming support for the North Korean regime in the immediate aftermath of Japanese colonial rule. Whereas the communist North was identified with the anti-colonial movement, the South Korean regime was more closely aligned with the landlords who were the presumed collaborators with Japanese rule. Nevertheless, especially after the 1965 Normalization Treaty between Japan and South Korea that made travel between the two countries legal and feasible,



the displaced geographical identification would become ever more problematic for the Zainichi population.

The disarticulation of peoplehood identity goes deeper for Zainichi. Already at the moment of Liberation, or the end of World War II, Zainichi lingua franca was more Japanese than Korean. There was also considerable cultural assimilation. Nevertheless, ethnic Korean identification remained strong. One of the benefits of North Korean identification was the availability of ethnic schools that made Korean language acquisition possible. Yet, as Sonia Ryang has tellingly described, the Zainichi mastery of Korean does not denote native fluency of the language spoken in North Korea (Ryang 1997). After all, most first-generation Zainichi immigrants spoke one of the southern dialects, far from the normative phonology of the North Korean regime. More significantly, the pervasive presence of Japanese – the de facto native language for second- and later-generation Zainichi – precluded native pronunciation and instilled Japanese-inflected Korean. Linguistic drift in any case was accentuated by cultural divergence: what Zainichi youths acquired was much less North Korean official culture and much more Japanese popular culture, from popular music to manga and movies. In short, Zainichi found it almost impossible to be accepted as “normal” Korean in either North or South Korea.

Finally, and most importantly, most Zainichi, however excited by the prospect of returning to their ethnonational homeland, accommodated to their livelihood in Japan. It was not just the matter of language mastery but also the reality that the vast majority of people they grew up with lived in Japan, not in North (or South) Korea. They had not only language and culture, but also family and neighborhood, in Japan. That is, for all intents and purposes, Japan was the homeland for most Zainichi. Emigration elsewhere, to China or the United States, seemed unimaginable in the immediate post-

World War II decades. The modal response to the question of repatriation was when North and South Korea are unified, which became a receding endpoint.

To be sure, there was one concerted attempt at repatriation. In the very late 1950s and early 1960s, some North Koreans in Japan returned to their putative homeland, North Korea (Morris-Suzuki 2007). Backed by Japanese and North Korean powers, as well as an intense mobilization by the North-Korea-affiliated organization in Japan, Chongryun, the repatriation movement sent nearly 100,000 Zainichi to North Korea. The project would prove to be a disaster. Repatriation was literally a misnomer for the vast majority of Zainichi youths who had never set foot on their putative homeland. It was also a foreign country not only in terms of life experience but also language, culture, and everyday life. The North Korean regime consigned some Zainichi to second-class status, suspected as they were of being spies. Not only were they not embraced by their compatriots, but Zainichi returnees also found the country in a state far from their idealized vision as a socialist paradise. Impoverished in comparison to Japan, North Korea did not provide material abundance, cultural cornucopia, or even existential freedom.

In short, it was Zainichi misrecognition to believe that North Korea provided a homeland, much less a paradise. The misrecognition is understandable, however, given the attitudes of Japanese society toward the Zainichi in the dark decades of disrecognition until the 1980s, a time when the Zainichi population received almost no benefits from Japan but faced xenophobic and racist attitudes and actions. Simultaneously, South Korea did little to welcome Zainichi and the South Korea-affiliated Zainichi organization was ineffective in improving Zainichi lives. In contrast, Chongryun provided basic services, such as ethnic schooling and financial services, when

the Japanese state all but ignored and excluded Zainichi. As a quasi-state organization and almost the sole protector and provider for the ethnic Korean population, it is not at all surprising that Chongryun generated a great deal of support from many Zainichi in the immediate post-World War II decades.

By the mid 2010s, however, it was difficult for most Zainichi to find anything remotely positive about North Korea or even Chongryun. The country had come to stand for everything terrible in the contemporary world: a rogue state, a human-rights disaster area, a land of massive famines, a totalitarian society. Symptomatically, a nuclear-armed North Korea is feared even as it is derided. Being relatively closed off from the globalizing world - never mind that it was probably more outward-oriented than South Korea until the 1970s - it is a source of endless fascination to external observers. Not surprisingly virtually everything written about North Korea by outsiders is unrelentingly negative. Reading these works, it is a wonder that the regime survives at all, except perhaps by totalitarian rule. The situation in Japan is no different from that in the United States with respect to writing about North Korea. Although a potential military threat, North Korea stands more as a country of unimaginable poverty and buffoonish rulers. Is it possible to talk about North Korea dispassionately or intelligently and, more to the point, to make sense of North Koreans in Japan? And if not about North Korea, surely something positive might be preserved about Chongryun, an organization that had served much of the Zainichi population in the post-World War II decades?

Yang Yonghi's "Kazoku no kuni"



**Yi Hoe-sông**

After Yi Hoe-sông won the Akutagawa Prize - perhaps the most prestigious literary award in Japan - in 1971, some pundits spoke of a boom in Zainichi literature. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, there was a veritable boom in Zainichi directors and themes in Japanese film. Although occasionally dismissed as a fringe phenomenon owing to the disappearance of discussion of social problems in Japanese life, the preponderance of Zainichi themes and directors among prizewinning Japanese films in the first decade of the twenty-first century is remarkable. Movies such as *Go* (2001) and *Pacchigi* (2004) proved to be commercial as well as critical successes. Whereas these movies considered Zainichi, it is fair to say that they hardly touched on the politics of national division among Zainichi or the deeper fractional struggles in the minority population. Rather, the narrative center is the

budding romance between Zainichi and Japanese youths (Zainichi boy and ethnic Japanese girl in the case of *Go*; Zainichi girl and ethnic Japanese boy in the case of *Pacchigi*). But none of these films seriously explored the historical, political, and sociological background or struggles of the Zainichi population. Perhaps the movie that came closest to achieving this task was *Chi to hone* (Blood and Bone, 2004) but the focus here was resolutely on the protagonist (as depicted and narrated by his son) and his patriarchal tyranny. That the patriarch would leave his considerable fortune to North Korea is a mere afterthought, as if it were yet another whimsical decision of the tyrant. In a negative transposition, the tyrannical father and the oppressive country with which he identifies stand in contrast to the son. The human drama, however, is interpersonal and without much recognition of the colonial context or the second-class status of Zainichi in colonial or postcolonial Japan. Needless to say, it is not the central task of most films to offer a sociological or historical lesson and it may be beside the point to say that these and other Zainichi-themed movies deflect the prejudice and discrimination with which the Zainichi population suffered for much of the twentieth century in Japan. Certainly, the viewer learns very little about the place of North Korea or Chongryun in Zainichi lives, offering few clues to the attraction of North Korea to Chongryun activists and Zainichi Korean nationalists.

It is in this context that *Kazoku no kuni* (officially translated into English as “My Homeland” (a more literal rendering would be “The Country of My Family”) provides an interesting intervention. Yang Yonghi’s 2012 film was ranked number one in the prestigious journal *Kinema Junpō*’s annual ranking of the best Japanese movies, and it was lavished with considerable critical praise. Yang had directed two prizewinning documentaries before *Kazoku no kuni*: *Dear Pyongyang* (2005) and *Itoshiki Sona* (“Dear Sona,” 2011), about her father, a

first-generation Zainichi in Osaka, and her brothers’ decision to emigrate to North Korea, and about Yang’s niece, a young daughter of one of the brothers who had emigrated to North Korea. Both accounts attempt to depict the full dimension of Zainichi and Zainichi-turned-North Korean lives, replete with humor and warmth often lacking in other accounts. Above all, without being blind to the larger context of Zainichi lives, the documentaries depict them as multidimensional human beings.



**Kazoku no kuni**

*Kazoku no kuni* is cast in the free direct style common to most films. Documentary-like, the viewer is given access to a series of scenes to observe from multiple perspectives a situation or a conversation: “you are there.” There are no overarching narrators or narrations but the indisputable center of the film is the daughter

of the protagonist family. Almost the youngest character in the film – she is about 30 in the film, an instructor at a foreign-language school – the point of view from the most junior member of the family is accentuated by the use of hiragana in the title (hiragana being the first of the four major scripts that Japanese learn and writing the whole title in hiragana evokes infantile writing). The film opens with the excitement of the family at the imminent return of the son and the elder brother of the family (hereinafter referred to as the brother). The family home, not atypically for a very small, family-run business in Japan, is on the second floor of a house where they run a small coffee shop on the ground floor. The father works for the North Korean organization Chongryun. The brother had participated in the repatriation campaign and has been residing in North Korea since around 1960. In order to undergo a medical operation, the North Korean regime allows his return to Japan (not only is he the son of a major officer of Chongryun but it is suggested that the family provided a sizable “contribution” to North Korea). The excitement and joy of his return over two decades after his departure is squelched by the sudden reversal of the never-seen North Korean regime’s decision, which decrees his immediate return.

The brother is depicted as kind and caring but somehow silenced and certainly taciturn. It is not that he has become unrecognizable but it is also clear that he is not as vibrant as he once was, and not just for medical reasons. By and large he appears resigned not only to his life in North Korea but also to his life-threatening illness. Even when he encounters his first love, there is no visible emotional excitement. When she suggests her enduring concern and love for him, his response is tepid and passive. In the penultimate scene in the film, as he is being driven to the airport, he hums a tune that was popular when he left Japan (one associated with his first love). It may be possible to detect nostalgia or regret, but it is at best faintly expressed.

The brother’s inevitable double is the North Korean agent who stalks him wherever he goes. The parents are resigned – it’s depicted as simply a North Korean *modus operandi* – but his mother in particular seeks to curry favor, providing a brand new suit for the agent as they are about to return to North Korea. The human effort – perhaps hoping for better treatment – is underscored by the ordinariness of the North Korean agent. Unable to express himself openly, he is also clearly not free to act as he pleases. Ensconced in a small hotel room, the man watches soft-core pornography – a suggestion that he is an “ordinary” man – but his recumbent pose suddenly transforms into an erect posture when he receives a phone call from his North Korean superior ordering the brother’s immediate return. Nevertheless, there is no particular suggestion that he is in any way evil. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the film is that all the characters are depicted empathetically and sympathetically. As noted, the mother is a singularly sympathetic character, saving money for her children and smiling insistently even when things go awry. The uncle, a successful businessman, wishes to shower his nephew and niece with spending money. Even the father, who must grimly accept the North Korean regime’s decisions, far from being a cold bureaucrat, is presented as a person suffused with paternal love.

The daughter’s perspective is persistently critical. Aside from the veiled criticism by the rich uncle of her father’s allegiance to Chongryun and North Korea, hers is the sole voice of dissent in the film. Working as a language teacher, with no romantic partners, she seems to harbor no ill will or discomfort about life in Japan. Indeed, there is no suggestion that the Zainichi situation is at all problematic. Rather, all the visible problems are concentrated in her family’s allegiance to the irrational, hierarchical, and secretive North Korean regime and its agent in Japan, Chongryun. Her sotto voce complaints explode into outright rage directed against her father



and the agent as she learns that her brother must return before he is able to undergo his operation. The final scene of the film depicts her acquiring a Rimowa suitcase, presumably to fulfill her long-held desire to see the world and escape the narrow confines of her family and Chongryun. Surrounded by largely passive characters, she stands as the lone, active character for whom the world is far from being an entity decided by forces beyond her view and ken.

The film articulates a compelling narrative, then. In proto-feminist fashion, the hitherto trapped daughter escapes the thrall of her family and Chongryun. In contrast to the tragic arc of her brother, she may yet win freedom and experience the wide world that her brother was unable to as he repatriated to the occluded, oppressive regime (and, in fact, he encourages her to do so in the film). In spite of the empathetic portrayals of other characters, they are complicit with the country and the organization that are responsible for the central tragedy of the film. In following the time-tested convention of realist novels and films – an individual struggling against the constraint of an outmoded but powerful institution – *Kazoku no kuni* achieves a rare feat among contemporary Japanese films in conveying a taut, tense, and meaningful narrative. No wonder it won so much critical praise and audience support.

### A Cloud of Unknowing

*Kazoku no kuni* is a brilliant film. However, it is mired in the dominant discourse that castigates one side of the inevitable binary and celebrates the other side. North Korea, Chongryun, and people who support the regime and the organization are, whatever their personal decency or goodness, trapped in reproducing the evil order and those who oppose them are lionized.

As I have stressed, the point is not to defend or celebrate the North Korean regime or

Chongryun. It is not my intention to deny reports of human rights abuses or economic disasters in North Korea or the wrongdoings that critics ascribe to Chongryun. Rather, by focusing exclusively on their effects on or consequences for individuals, *Kazoku no kuni* occludes the origins and causes that brought about and sustained the regime and the organization. That is, as evinced from the widespread support for North Korea immediately after the end of colonial rule, it was not simply by propaganda or terror that Kim Il-sung and his comrades came to power. And for its part, Chongryun provided necessary defense and support for Zainichi livelihood in the dark decades of disrecognition. Without registering any recognition of Japanese colonial rule or postcolonial Japanese racism, the beliefs and actions of the daughter's parents or her brother seem foolish at best and mad at worst. They are most likely confused and confounded, moving unknowingly to create and sustain the tragedy not only of the brother but the larger populations of North Koreans and North Koreans in Japan.

My argument is not that Yang is an unreflective anti-communist or convinced anti-North Korea propagandist. To be sure, she is almost certainly highly critical of both the North Korean regime and Chongryun. Indeed, by eliding Zainichi history and sociology, the endpoint she reaches is not very different from the received anti-North Korean narrative. The viewer cannot but applaud the daughter's escape into freedom, not unlike that of North Korean refugees in South Korea, the United States, and elsewhere (though, needless to say, in a much kinder and gentler articulation). In so doing, the film bypasses the deep reservoir of colonial rule and postcolonial racism that created the conditions of possibility of North Korea and Chongryun.

Even today, in spite of improvements in Zainichi lives, they remain subject to considerable prejudice and discrimination,



including hate speech and physical violence. The situation was much, much worse in the postwar period. It is only after decades of struggle that Zainichi won basic rights to work and live, to be recognized and even respected, in Japan. As reprehensible as Chongryun may appear today, it would be problematic to erase completely their long and continuing efforts to enhance the lives of ethnic Koreans. It is not only from misguided idealism or organizational tyranny that the father and the family remain loyal to Chongryun and by extension to North Korea. Put differently, in spite of Yang's considerable empathy, the viewer cannot come close to understanding the moral universe that motivates the daughter's family members. The country of my family remains a foreign country – and hence Chongryun and her family remain unknowable as well – for the daughter and the viewers who are ignorant of the postwar history of postcolonial racism. The film's considerable aesthetic achievements are vitiated by the elision of, and lack of empathy for, the past.

Related article:

Sonia Ryang, [The Saga of Koreans in Japan: The Rise and Fall of Chongryun--From Chōsenjin to Zainichi and beyond](#)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> That this statement may need any supportive footnote is a testament to the rapid passage of time and the corresponding corrosion of certitude and commonsense. See therefore Furet (1995). It is for the same reason that the classic critiques of communism and its adherents read like period pieces in the early twenty-first century. See e.g. Milosz (1953) and Aron (1955).

<sup>2</sup> The sort of defeat that Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes in *Die Kultur der Niederlage* (2001) is distinct in that the postbellum American South – as much as it was on the losing side and supported a morally untenable order – retained a strong sense of self-justificatory sentiment and even pride. The same sort of being a proud, even unrepentant, loser seems unavailable to past communists. See e.g. Tony Judt's excoriating review of Eric Hobsbawm's autobiography for the latter's failure to denounce his communist allegiance (Hobsbawm 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Wolf (1990) and Gansel (2014).

<sup>4</sup> For two attempts to make sense of the transformations of *juche* ideology, see Pak (1999) and Ogura (2015), esp. chap.6.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of Shin Dong-hyuk's fact and fiction, see e.g. Lankov (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Just in 2015, there were at least five books by major trade publishers, including Park (2015) and Kim (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, there are exceptions. In the United States, for example, see the works of Bruce Cumings and his students: Cumings (2003), Armstrong (2013), and Kim (2013). In Japan, see e.g. Wada (2013).

<sup>8</sup> I have benefited from several conversations with Director Yang in Berkeley, California, and in Tokyo, in 2015.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Yasuda (2015) and Ha (2015).