Book Review: "I was a North Korean Diplomat: Inside the Secret World of Pyongyang's Foreign Service" by Han Jin-myung and Nicolas Levi

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I was a North Korean Diplomat: Inside the Secret World of Pyongyang's Foreign Service is a conversation between Han Jin-myung, a former Third Secretary at the North Korean Embassy in Hanoi, and Nicolas Levi, a Senior Researcher at the Polish Academy of Sciences and consultant on North Korean affairs for international organisations. Levi guides the discussion across two domains: Han's lived experiences, from his upbringing in Pyongyang's elite Mangyongdae neighbourhood to his life after defecting to South Korea, and North Korea's institutions and structures, with recurring themes of power, control, uncertainty and identity. The result is an indispensable insider account of the North Korean apparatus, albeit best read alongside more methodologically transparent scholarship.

The primary goal of the book, as stated by Levi, is to add to the discourse on North Korea based on defectors' testimonies. There are four main themes that the book contributes to, although they are not explicitly arranged as such. The first is the importance of control over the elites. Han grew up in a privileged environment owing to his family's legacy. In a country where loyalty is perceived as currency for transactions with the regime, he enjoyed advantages reserved for the revolutionary elite, such as access to North Korea's top educational institutions, and ultimately a job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The

significance of one's lineage runs through Han's responses, although, in retrospect, he reflects that all the privileges were a "golden cage," (Han and Levi 2026, 28) enforcing mutual surveillance even on the most loyal citizens, and instilling constant uncertainty about every aspect of life.

The second theme is the functioning of the regime's diplomatic network. A former MOFA employee, Han describes the decision-making mechanisms of North Korean foreign policy, including inter-institutional competition between the MOFA and the Workers' Party of Korea. Ultimately, while stationed at the North Korean Embassy in Hanoi, he experienced diplomacy as a revenue-generating mechanism. North Korea's embassies must generate hard currency through legal and illicit operations which include real estate, vehicle resale, counterfeit dollars, and the inflated resale of sanctioned goods through the port of Nampo.

The third theme Han and Levi contribute to is the strategic logic of regime survival. Continuity and stability, according to Han, must be projected to the outside world, with nuclear weapons serving as a "life insurance policy," (Han and Levi 2026, 118) and contributing to deterrence, negotiating leverage and revenue. Drones function both as asymmetric compensation for conventional military inferiority and as protection against an attack on Pyongyang. Lastly, China appears as an economic "lung" (Han and Levi 2026, 116) for sanctions evasion, and as the biggest hurdle to reunification.

The final theme concerns the lives of North Koreans upon deciding to defect and after reaching South Korea. While Levi and Han consistently use the term "refugees," (for example, Han and Levi 2026, 101) North Koreans who reach the South are granted citizenship, not asylum (Kim and Hocking 2020, 3). Han defected in January 2015 due to a financial dispute with his ambassador, distant ties to the purged Jang Song-thaek, and the discovery of South Korean documents on an embassy computer. Narrating his personal experience, he recalls the cold reception at the South Korean Embassy in Vientiane, the issuance of a South Korean passport in place of his North Korean one, the subsequent loss of identity, and the lack of integration mechanisms for North Koreans. Reflecting broadly on his peers, he argues their defections are driven by fear of purges rather than by an ideological awakening.

The book takes the form of a semi-structured interview while allowing Han room to digress. The interview format keeps the content accessible and free of technical jargon. Although a certain chronological order is evident, the authors do not specify over what period the conversations took place or how their topics were chosen and sequenced. Levi appears as a knowledgeable guide through his questions, but the task of triangulating the

testimony against the open-source record is left to the reader. A smaller conundrum appears as Han writes under a pseudonym yet appears in several clearly identifiable photographs, a decision that may indicate partial protection rather than a genuine attempt at concealment.

The value of the book lies in its insights into North Korean institutions, contributing to the elite defector literature, such as the memoirs of Hwang Jang-yop, Jang Jin-sung, and Thae Yong-ho, and to scholarship on the regime's sanctions evasion. Han offers a close account of the ministry's internal organisation and of how its revenue strategies adapt to different host regions, from Africa to Southeast Asia to Europe. His description of a drone programme already in the 1990s, and his account of elite life after defection, extend the record further. However, the insider knowledge that lends the book its value leaves one notable gap. Given Han's work on the overseas dissemination of Juche, the book is reticent on ideological diplomacy. Han mentions ideological seminars in Pyongyang and friendship societies operating abroad but says little about what those seminars entail or how their content is adapted to different audiences.

The account's limitations are derived from the genre of the book. As a single-source testimony, every claim, from the MOFA's organisational chart to the 1990s drone development programme, rests on Han's account alone. The difficulty is that the book rarely distinguishes between what he witnessed directly, what circulated as institutional knowledge within the MOFA, and what he reconstructs after his defection. A brief framing of each set of conversations or occasional notes situating a claim against the public record would have made the content considerably more transparent. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the book's standing as a testimony as it succeeds on its own terms as a former diplomat's analysis of North Korea, drawing on personal and professional experience.

Ultimately, Han and Levi offer a rare inside reading of a highly opaque system, a valuable resource for researchers tracing the mechanics of the regime's sanctions evasion and elite control.

References

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