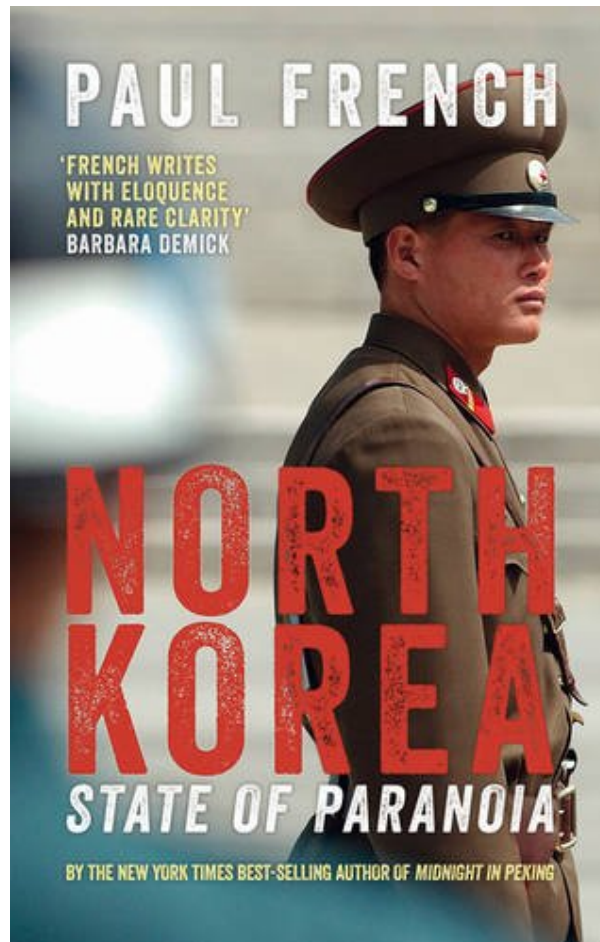
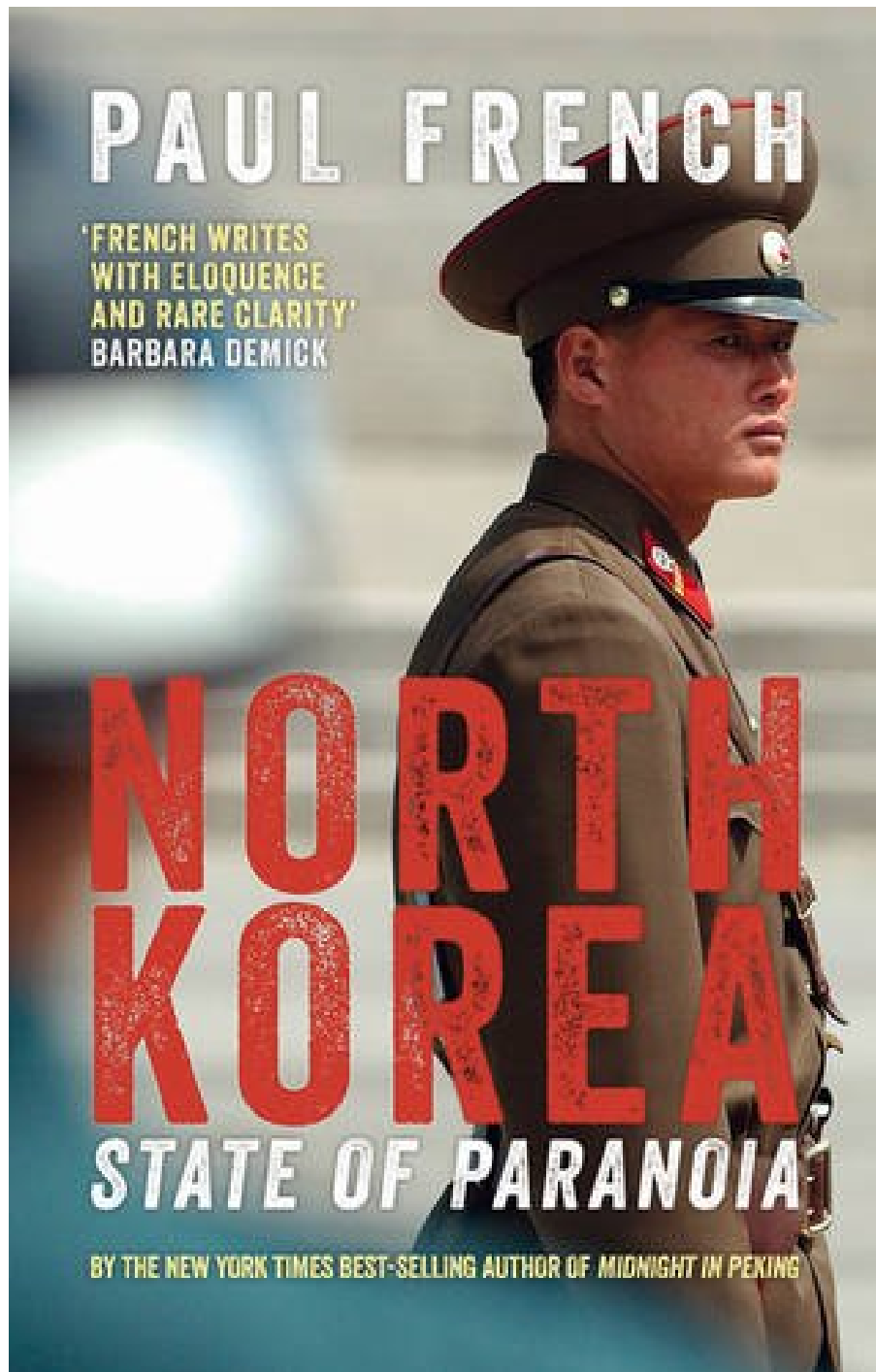


NORTH KOREA: STATE OF PARANOIA (ASIAN ARGUMENTS) BY PAUL FRENCH



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Review

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About the Author

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North Korea is a country that continues to make headlines—arousing curiosity and fear in equal measure. The world's most secretive nuclear power, it is a nation that still has Gulag-style prison camps, no internet, and bans its people from talking to foreigners without official approval. In this remarkable and eye-opening book, bestselling author Paul French takes the reader inside the world's most secretive country. He examines the history and politics of North Korea, Pyongyang's complex relations with South Korea, Japan, and America. As China begins to tire of its unruly ally, what are the implications of Kim Jong-un's increasingly belligerent leadership following the death of his father, Kim Jong-il? As an already unstable North Korea grows ever more unpredictable, antagonizing enemies and allies alike, *North Korea: State of Paranoia*, delivers a provocative and frightening account of a potentially explosive nuclear tripwire.

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Most helpful customer reviews

24 of 26 people found the following review helpful.

Dense; Not for the Casual Reader

By Steven M. Anthony

I received this book as a galley proofs edition from the publisher in exchange for this review.

The country of North Korea is a fascinating political and economic case study. Any author or analyst taking on the job is faced with the daunting task of accumulating information and data of reasonable reliability and/or accuracy. The author here has done an admirable job of researching and marshaling the information at his disposal. In my opinion, however, he does a poor job of organizing and presenting facts.

While he largely progresses in a linear time frame, parts of the book are organized by topic. The time frame thus becomes confusing as the author moves backward and forward through time within the same chapters, leaving me at times confused. The chapter dealing with the Korean economy is relatively dense and quite frankly, largely over my head. I'm pretty sure I could have grasped most of the theory had I been inclined to grind over it and perhaps consult other references, but that was not why I purchased the book. Some graduate level economists might enjoy and appreciate this substantial section of the book, but I suspect the author's target audience in this regard is quite small.

I enjoyed and appreciated much more the political discussion and historical perspective provided in the latter sections of the work. I was curious, however, why the discussion of almost every topic cut off abruptly during the first George W. Bush term. There is one short chapter at the end of the book which mentions the accession of Kim Jong-un, but my guess is that the book was written in 2004-2005, dusted off, brought cursorily up to date, and published recently. Barack Obama was mentioned a grand total of once within the body of the work. A book published in 2014, dealing with North Korea, should have more current information than what is contained in this book.

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Ignorance, Insularity, Ideology, and Fear

By not a natural

North Korea is a nation created by war. In 1945, with the end of World War II, the Korean peninsula was divided into two occupied zones, with the northern zone occupied by the Soviet Union and the U.S. occupying the south. In 1948, under the auspices of the United Nations, a government was formed in each zone, with the nature of political and economic life in each loosely reflecting that which prevailed in the occupying country. Whether or not this division resulted in the formation of two distinct nations, North Korea and South Korea, remains subject to heated contestation. Clearly, in 1950, when North Korea invaded the South, it was invoking its judgment that there was only one Korean nation, which they would unite through force. After back-and-forth victories by both sides, fighting was called to a halt with an armistice in 1953. Since such an armistice, by its nature, is merely a cessation of hostilities during which formal peace terms may be discussed, in a strictly formal sense North and South Korea are still at war, and the demilitarized zone, spanning the 38th parallel that separates them remains a tense and uncertain boundary.

Paul French's extraordinarily informative book *North Korea: State of Paranoia* was written in hopes of illuminating life in intensely insular North Korea, providing the context needed to understand the sometimes seemingly senseless behavior of this country toward the outside world and, insofar as we can catch an occasional glimpse across its borders, making sense of its domestic policy, as well. Fittingly, French begins his book with disclaimers as to the adequacy of the information used in writing his book. He emphasizes that North Korea is a tightly closed society, a throwback to the days before the fall of the iron curtain, and even by Cold War standards it is remarkably effective at preventing outsiders from learning much of anything about it.

Nevertheless, French manages to produce a geo-political portrait of North Korea that goes a long way toward enabling readers to understand North Korea and the way it functions as a nation and a homeland. As French forcefully reminds us, the material that went into the construction of his depiction of North Korea is meager and, in unknowably numerous ways, may be erroneous. Nevertheless, the coherence of French's characterization, along with the plausibility of his insights, both argue strongly for the veracity and value of North Korea: State of Paranoia.

The observation that I found most unexpected and interesting is that North Korea's efforts to be as secretive as possible have not only prevented outsiders from learning much about them, but they have also made North Koreans, including high-level policy makers, astonishingly ignorant of the world beyond their borders. If North Korea threw open wide and numerous exits to the nations with which it shares borders, South Korea, China, and Russia, the citizens who walked out would find themselves in places so socially and culturally different that fear of the unknown might drive them back. Given that all but the favored few would return to the most abject poverty imaginable, that's some pretty intense fear.

Perhaps the most troubling question for those leaving the North would be just how does one behave in a society where the heavy hand of the *juche* ideology does not prevail. For those familiar with the leadership principle that organized life in Nazi Germany, *juche* will be familiar, though it is harsher and much more inclusive. According to *juche*, as it has evolved from a mix of perversely incompatible elements of Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism and the tradition of Confucian teachings, one should welcome hardship in the name of the nation. This entails not only hunger, disease, and unremitting hard work, but unquestioning obedience to those in authority and embracing the program of the ruling party without so much as intimating alternatives. It's hard to imagine North Koreans making a go of it without ration coupons and detailed instructions as to how they should spend every minute of their time. Never having known a different way of living, the promise of a new life, one that is unmapped and misunderstood, seems terrifying, indeed.

Members of the arrogant and favored elite, however, would be more likely to be humiliated than frightened. The ignorance they have frequently displayed when soliciting foreign investments tells us a great deal about them and their crippling insularity. Their comically ill-informed and failed efforts to encourage investment zones set aside for quasi-capitalist development but without gas, electricity, and infrastructure represent a wholesale misreading of the nature of incentives expected by prospective outside investors with hard currency, and betray the ignorance and apathy of the elite.

Propped up by dwindling but valuable aid from a handful of other countries and international humanitarian organizations, North Korea deteriorates but fails to collapse, though I'm not certain what a collapsed nation looks like. In any case, North Korea's continued survival is welcomed by South Korea, China, and Russia, and wherever else a massive exodus of immigrants from an imploded North Korea might be headed. In the meantime, the North's current military first policy, which it artfully reconciles with *juche*, drains resources from internal development and, whatever its limitations, enables the North to play its nuclear card in remarkably effective ways. It's a sad irony of international relations that the possession of this one weapon and the rest of the world's uncertainty as to whether they'll use it in a certainly lost, even suicidal cause gives the North clout far in excess of its overall strength.

Imbued with the *juche* ideology, and never having known anything other than oppression, autocracy, regimentation, and total disengagement from the rest of the world, the ordinary citizenry as prospective reformers can be counted on for little more than an understandably disorganized and transient food riot. Besides, lack of adequate caloric intake and other manifestations of malnutrition to the point of near starvation face North Korean citizens with more immediate concerns than reforming their failed state.

There is evidence that even with the military first policy in place, North Korea's armed forces are in a state of decline simply because agricultural production and other key components of the economy are in such bad condition. If high ranking officers were to stage a coup, what should we expect? Military personnel participate in all aspects of life in the North, compensating for a worsening manpower shortage. Nevertheless, given that insularity and the *juche* ideology have stifled the development of intellectual life and the development of science-based technology, those who would replace the current North Korean leadership may not know how to go beyond what exists. Ironically, the North's failures, at least for now, may contribute to insuring continuation of the status quo in a nation created by war and maintained by ignorance, insularity, ideology, and fear.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

This Book Is a Must Read

By Thomas John

This book is a thorough and scholarly examination of North Korea. My interest in North Korea began to develop after watching the films "A State of Mind" (2004) and "Crossing the Line," (2006), both available on Netflix. From there I read some of the other more anecdotal books concerning North Korea, such as "Nothing to Envy" and "The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia" among others.

The saying (used) to go, "all paths lead to Rome." All serious interest in North Korea will lead to this book, "North Korea: State of Paranoia." The other books were very interesting in discussing and making real the existence, and suffering, in North Korea. This book is not as anecdotal as are the other works (or films). However, this book is scholarly and comprehensive, and helps bring together the stories and observations of the other books and films into the big picture.

What has fascinated me about North Korea are two things. One is that North Korea is the only remaining Stalinist country in the world, i.e., command economy and institutionalized xenophobia. (It is also a monarchy.) The second thing is the ability of a government to thoroughly control its citizens under impoverished and oppressive conditions. This kind of country is what George Orwell had in mind in his 1984. This is a country which is a warning to us in America and elsewhere of what can be if we do not vigilantly protect our freedoms.

If you are seriously interested in North Korea, this book is a must read.

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