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North Korea



Synopsis

An unprecedented photographic tour of North Korea that examines life under the Kims' totalitarian regime. For more than half a century, North Korea has been the epitome of a rogue state. Since the defeat of the Japanese occupation in 1945 it has been a nation apart, ruled by father-and-son autocrats; the late Kim Il-sung, known as the Great Leader, and his successor Kim Jong-il, known as the Dear Leader; who have expanded the cult of personality to unparalleled lengths. No regime, past or present, has ever created an environment of such ubiquitous propaganda. In finely orchestrated detail, flags, murals, and slogans praise the party, while monuments, statues, and portraits glorify its leaders. Philippe Chancel's neutral but sophisticated photographs explore how the political has been transfigured into an all-encompassing aesthetic. He shows us the wide, car-less avenues of Pyongyang; the capital city rebuilt to plans drawn up by the Great Leader himself; the Children's Palace, and the gigantic May Day Stadium, which seats up to 150,000 people. It is a remarkable scenography of a uniquely chilling reality. 129 color photographs.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Philippe Chancel is a photographer who has worked all over the world and has exhibited widely. He is a contributor to the magazine *Connaissance des arts*. Michel Poivert teaches at the Sorbonne. Jonathan Fenby, former editor of the *South China Post*, has written widely on the Far East.

Excellent photo book.

Beautiful, eery photos of a fascinating land and people. Book is substantial and laid out nicely.

I recently purchased two North Korean photo books, "North Korea" (which is this one) and "Inside North Korea" (Inside North Korea). Both books are excellent but the two are actually quite different. "North Korea" is by far the more beautiful of the two books. The weather seems to have been good while the photographer visited the country. The photos are stunning, and the layout is clean and very nicely done. In the introduction, the authors explain why they chose not to add the usual commentary critical of the country's government. So there are no lambasting articles cluttering-up the layout, which is refreshing and works to the book's advantage. Instead, photo captions are brief and neutral, explaining the photos without going off on a tangent. Although Pyongyang is North Korea's 'showcase' city, if you look closely at the pictures, you can often see the crumbling bricks, the deteriorating roads and buildings, the vehicles that look like they've been recycled from another county, etc. Again, the typical negative comments aren't there to point all this out, but they aren't really needed because it's there in plain view. This photo book isn't the most comprehensive, since most of the photos are of Pyongyang. But instead of just focusing on the same series of monuments and buildings, this book also has plenty of photos of the landscape, the streets, and most importantly, the people. This book portrays the human side better than many other North Korean books, and it's one of the reasons why I find myself picking it up so often.

Philippe Chancel's NORTH KOREA is a collection of 129 beautiful photographs taken inside the little-touristed authoritarian state. It begins with the arrivals lounge at the Pyongyang airport, continues through the sterile hotels and communist monuments of the capital city, and displays some of the scenes of the southern border with South Korea. There are numerous photographs of the Arirang festival, where tens of thousands of schoolchildren form great pictures of patriotic scenes by holding up cards. There are a few snapshots from the Pyongyang metro, my favourite part of the Pyongyang tour because no one is really sure if the people in it are passengers on a working transit system, or actors giving foreigners the impression that the line is still in use. Of course, travel in North Korea is limited to what the government wants you to see. As a result, one will get little information here about the ordinary lives of Koreans outside of the government-organized spectacles. The only photographs of common Pyongyang residents on the street are where they are headed towards those spectacles. Nonetheless, one does get a vague

idea of the privation in North Korea, from the eerily empty coffee bar in the airport to the squalid VIP areas for tourists. Chancel's photographs are impressive achievements, all the more so since tourists in North Korea often find it difficult to take decent pictures outside a small handful of sights on the tour. In fact, the incongruity between the elegant composition of the photographs and the barbarity of Kim Jong-il's regime will soon stand out for the reader. The book also features a short introductory text by Michel Poivert and Jonathan Fenby which raises the question of the ethics of the aestheticization of horror.

Photo books about North Korea are few and far between and then two come along together (I wonder if publishers just hate that?). The other title is *Inside North Korea* with photos by Mark Harris. In fact they cover different aspects of the same country. Philippe Chancel's book essentially covers the capitol Pyongyang but Harris visits several places in the country. Pyongyang is stuffed with bureaucrats, civil servants and the military plus their families so it can hardly be considered truly representative of the country. Chancel's beautiful photos reflect this. You'll have to look hard to find the tell-tale signs of the typical third world city: poverty side by side with the wealthy few, falling apart infrastructure, litter and just too many people. What you will see are wide boulevards lined with apartment blocks, trees and grass covered areas, huge, solid, predictable socialist style museums, monuments and plenty of signage revealing the (wise?) political thoughts of the Great Leader and his lad. It all seems clean, tidy and nothing out of place. Even close-ups of people don't reveal inferior and tatty clothing. For the real Korea you'll have to look at the Mark Harris book. Both books rightly cover the extraordinary Arirang Massed Games (Chancel has twelve excellent photos) held in the 150,000-seat May Day Stadium where 100,000 performers parade and surrounding them 20,000 to 40,000 students create amazing human pictures by holding flip boards above their heads. How this part of the Games is organised would make a book in itself. Chancel also has several photos inside the Children's Palace showing embroidery, dancing and singing classes. I wonder if this kind of education is the norm outside of Pyongyang? 'North Korea' is a fascinating book (well designed and printed with 175 dpi photos) revealing a bit of this weird, closed nation though I would have liked to see some photos of how the average person lives at home. Probably a bit too much to ask of Kim and his chums. ***FOR AN INSIDE LOOK click 'customer images' under the cover.

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