

LORBER



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Kimjongilia

A Film by NC Heikin

USA / France / South Korea – 2009 – 74 min –
In English & Korean with English Subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

Kimjongilia is an unblinking indictment of life in North Korea under the dictatorship of Kim Jong Il. This searing examination of the communist dictatorship established by Kim Il-sung and continued today by his son Kim Jong-il dispels the illusion of a Worker's Paradise peddled by the North Korean government and exposes the injustice, tragedy and famine prevalent over the past forty years.

Director NC Heikin compiles a series of testimonies – and daring escape stories – from concentration camp refugees, defectors and former Korean Army officers. The result is a collage of firsthand witnesses to the unrepentant pain caused by the tyrannical leadership. The courageous individuals documented here have risked everything in the hope of exposing the truth about this cloistered, xenophobic territory.

Their testimonies are supplemented by interpretive dance and a riveting score, indicative of the film's keen interest in Korean art – both the propagandistic kind sanctioned by the government and the sort of artistic expression that can result in execution. Footage of cheery government propaganda is juxtaposed with survivor testimony and cold-hard facts. This practice of exposing the truth through ironic exhibition extends to its title: *Kimjongilia* being the name of the flower created to celebrate Kim Jong-il's 46th birthday. This feature-length documentary is a damning condemnation of a regime founded upon total oppression of its people.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

From the moment I first heard Kang Chol-hwan's story of childhood imprisonment in a concentration camp, I knew I had to do something to expose the staggering crimes against humanity taking place in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK). The idea of the existence of concentration camps in today's world was simply unacceptable. I started by trying to make a dramatic feature based on Kang's story, but in 2006, I decided to transform the film into a documentary. The interviews were mind-boggling. I developed the deepest respect for these survivors rebuilding their lives, but willing to share their painful pasts. At the same time, another story began to emerge – a cautionary tale of an entire nation held captive by mass repression and forced cult worship.

Since there is almost no pertinent footage from inside the DPRK, I searched for new ways to present this powerful material. Drawing on my background in the theatre, I wove performance into the narrative for its emotional impact, and North Korea's own operatic propaganda for its fantastic contrast to the defectors' testimony. The result is a film that may push the boundaries of documentary filmmaking, but hopefully never diminishes the tremendous emotional power of these courageous refugees.

- NC Heikin

BRIEF HISTORY OF NORTH KOREA

At the turn of the century, the Japanese “annexed” Korea and proceeded with a violent colonization program. Christian missionaries, who had already established themselves in Korea during the 19th century, aided Korean freedom fighters. In those days, most Korean elite were educated at missionary schools and professed the Protestant faith. Kim Il Sung’s grandfather was a Protestant minister, and Kim Il Sung was a devout Christian who used to play organ for church services. The young Kim began his first organized activities within the church. As resisters, his family had fled the Japanese and taken up residence in China. Kim Il Sung joined a band of resisters as a teenager, and by 1932 had adopted communism. He led skirmishes against the Japanese, until they began hunting him down, at which point he fled to the Soviet Union. With the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, Korea was free, but the Cold War jockeying began for the so-called Zones of Influence. The Soviets and the US agreed to free elections, but the Soviets reneged. Kim Il Sung established a Marxist state in the North in 1948. He convinced Stalin that he could sweep through South Korea and reunite the country under communism. The North attacked the South in 1950, and unleashed a bloody, destructive war that engaged the UN, led by the US for the South, and the Soviets and then the Chinese for the North. After three years of fighting, both sides were back to the 38th parallel dividing line established by the US and USSR at Yalta. This has become the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ. No peace treaty has ever been signed. Kim Il Sung began to establish his Workers’ Paradise thereafter, based on Stalinist practice and his own original philosophy of Juche, roughly translated as self-reliance.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

- 1910 – Japan colonizes Korea
- 1913 – Kim Il Sung born to Christian family. His grandfather was a Protestant minister.
- 1919-1940 – Freedom fighters, aided by the Church, resist the Japanese.
- 1932 – Kim Il Sung joins the resistance and adopts communism.
- 1935 – The Japanese put a price on Kim Il Sung’s head.
- 1941 – Kim Il Sung flees to the Soviet Union
- 1945 – The Allies defeat Japan and free Korea, but the Soviets and the US divide it along the 38th parallel. Kim Il Sung returns to North Korea with the Soviets.
- 1948 – Kim Il Sung founds the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as a Marxist state.
- 1950 – North Korea attacks South Korea
- 1950-1953 – Korean War, with the US-led UN defending the South and the Soviet Union and China aiding the North. The war brings widespread destruction and death on both sides.
- 1953 – Armistice declared, Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) established on the 38th parallel, no peace treaty. North Korean propaganda blames the entire war on the American Imperialists.
- 1953-1970’s – Kim Il Sung and the Korean Workers Party rebuild North Korea with the intent of establishing a Workers’ Paradise.
- Late 1980’s – Soviet aid dries up and NK economy, already in bad shape, plummets.

PROFILES

Kang Chol-hwan: His grandfather was arrested for an unknown crime. The DPRK's policy of purging three generations for a "political" crime meant that Kang, his grandmother, father, uncles, and little sister were taken to Yodok prison camp. He was nine years old and spent the next ten years there. He got to South Korea in 1992 and was the first to expose and verify the existence of the prison camps.

Shin Dong-hyuk: He was born in a prison camp and raised to be a slave. He knew nothing of the outside world until a new prisoner from Pyongyang told stories about the food he used to eat. Shin began to feel the camp was unbearable and finally made a run for it, surviving the electrified fence, while his friend was electrocuted. He got to South Korea in 2006, at the age of 24.

Mrs. Kim: She was a former dancer whose best friend became Kim Jong Il's lover. Her presumed knowledge of the affair was enough to send her and her family to the camps. Of her parents, four children, and husband, only one son survives, in a coma, as a result of violent torture. In her 70's now, Mrs. Kim is passionate about freeing the North Koreans.

Kim Cheol-woong: An elite concert pianist who couldn't stand that he was forbidden to play the music he wanted, he escaped into China in 2001, and eventually got to South Korea with the help of Christian missionaries.

Lee Shin: Kidnapped and sold into slavery in China when she tried to defect. She had already suffered from the flaw of "impure bloodlines" in North Korea. Though a talented singer, she was given little opportunity because her voice was deemed "capitalist." She escaped her owner and made a run for the South Korean embassy in Beijing in 2002.

Byeon Ok-soon: During the Great Famine, Ok-soon was foraging for bark and roots to eat when she contracted typhoid fever. Her family was waiting helplessly for her to die when her brother stepped in. He carried her on his back into China to seek medical treatment. Her brother began to sneak back and forth across the border to bring food to his parents back in North Korea. He was caught and publicly executed.

CREDITS

Green Garnet Productions Presents KIMJONGILIA

Producer/Director	N.C. Heikin
Editors	Peterson Almeida, Mary Lampson
Cinematographer	Kyle Saylor
Animation & Graphics	Wilhelm Ogterop
Original Music	Michael Gordon
Consulting Editor	Kate Amend
Executive Producers	Mike Figgis, James Egan
Producers	NC Heikin, Robert Pepin, Young-sun Cho, David Novack
Co-producers	Su Kim, The Saylor Brothers, Ellen Kesend

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BIOS

N.C. Heikin

Director

N.C. Heikin studied dance and theatre at Sarah Lawrence College and immediately after graduation began working at La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, with Wilford Leach and Andrei Serban, among others. She created the title role in La Mama's renowned production "Carmilla," a Victorian vampire rock-opera. Also at La Mama, she created a series of interdisciplinary performance pieces, shown in New York City and at theatre festivals around the world. As guest director of the Native American Theatre ensemble, she collaborated with Peter Brook on a series of workshops with his company, as well as creating, with the ensemble, "Coyote Tracks," a musical based on the Coyote legends. Musical theatre writing credits include "Non Pasquale," presented at the Delacorte Theatre, Central Park, under the auspices of the New York Shakespeare Festival/Joseph Papp, and directed by Tony-winner Wilford Leach. In 1986 she began screenwriting with commissions from Paramount and Disney and has since done movies for TV and episodic work. Heikin made her film directing debut in 2004, with her prize-winning narrative short, *mañana*, which debuted on Indiepix in May 2008. *Kimjongilia* is her first documentary. It received a grant from the Sundance Institute documentary Film Program, and was invited to the Sundance Story & Edit Lab in June 2008.

Peterson Almeida

Editor

Peterson Almeida studied art, theatre and philosophy at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil. His series of drawings in ink and acrylic won 2nd prize at the new Talent Exhibit at Thomas Cohn Gallery in Sao Paulo. In 2003, he began making documentaries for Brazilian TV and is currently freelancing in France. His main credits include: *Guitars of Brazil*, *Terre de Sao Paulo*, *Sao Paulo Suite* (director and editor) *Duofel* (DVD), and *Duofel Live, Arena Conte l'Arene 50 ans*, all broadcast on TV cultura-Bresil. In France, Almeida directed and edited *Un Temple a la Gloire du Cheval*, a documentary on the Great Stables of Chantilly, as they prepare for a horse show, before starting to work on *Kimjongilia*.

Mary Lampson

Editor

Mary Lampson is an award-winning independent documentary filmmaker and editor. She co-edited the Academy Award-winning documentary *Harlan County USA*, and edited many other independently produced documentary features. Lampson has worked with Emile de Antonio, Ricky Leacock, and D.A. Pennebaker. She also produced and directed *Until She Talks*, a short dramatic film acquired by PBS for American Playhouse, and subsequently garnering prizes at the Mannheim and Athens film festivals, as well as winning a CINE Golden Eagle and Blue Ribbon. Lampson has produced more than 25 short live-action films for "Sesame Street" and teaches filmmaking to children as an artist-in-residence in public schools. Most recently, she worked with Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert on the feature documentary *A Lion in the House*, which screened at Sundance 2006 and won a Special Jury Citation at Full Frame and the Audience Award at Hot Docs; *Rain in a Dry Land*, Anne Makepeace's latest film which was at the Sundance Lab in 2005 and opened Independent Lens 2007; and co-edited on *Trouble the Water*, which won the Sundance 2008 Documentary Grand Jury Prize.

Kyle Saylor

Cinematographer

Kyle Saylor is co-founder of Saylor Brothers Entertainment. He has independently produced or directed animation, features, documentaries, and television projects. Saylor started early, promoting concerts like Galveston Island Spring Break Concert Series. He went on to produce content or freelance for NBC Sports, FOX, PAX, MTV, BET, Super Bowl Pre-Game Special, and more. He produced or directed music videos with Sony, Epic Records, Master P, Grammy winners, and others. His projects have also been featured on "MTV's Most Expensive Music Videos," *Forbes*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek*. Current projects include *Facing the Fat* (documentary following world's longest fast), *Hollywood on Fire* (Jane Russell, Eric Close) and "Inspired Ambition," (prime-time syndicated reality series airing on FamilyNet).

Wilhelm Ogterop

Animation

Wilhelm Ogterop is originally from South Africa where he studied graphic design and specialized in computer animation. He worked for close to four years on television and video graphics before starting to work as lead animator in the computer games industry on titles like *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *James Bond*. He is also involved in independent film and produces his own short animations.

Michael Gordon

Composer

Michael Gordon's influences include underground New York rock bands and formal training in composition at Yale with Martin Bresnick. He is one of the founders and artistic directors of New York's *Bang on a Can Festival*. His work, sometimes called post-minimalist, embraces dissonance, "irrational" rhythm, modality and pop culture. Among his many works are an opera, *The Carbon Copy Building*, in collaboration with comic book artist Ben Katchor, which won a 200 OBIE award, and *Decasia*, a large-scale symphony with projections commissioned by Europaischer Musikmonat for the Basel Sinfonettia, which was later staged by the Ridge Theater and subsequently made into a film (2002 Sundance Film Festival.) He has recorded extensively including the recent CD *Light is Calling* on Nonesuch.

INTERVIEW WITH NC HEIKIN

by Stefan Ulstein

The Kimjongilia is a hybrid flower that honors North Korea's Kim Jong Il. N.C. Heikin's documentary film, *Kimjongilia* fuses passionate interviews, rare footage of North Korea and exquisitely choreographed dance to tell the stories of people who have escaped from North Korea. Although Kim Jong Il's nuclear ambitions fill the pages of our newspapers and television screens, the lives of the North Korean people are only a subtext. Heikin's ambition is to allow North Korean refugees tell their own stories. And to tell their stories is to tell the story of the Korean church. We met with Heikin at the Seattle International Film Festival.

SU: Given the extreme measures that North Korea takes to keep its people from escaping, it's surprising how many people do get out. What kind of reception do the refugees get when they make it to the South?

NC: The South Korean government helps them with housing, education and jobs. They have it pretty well set up. It really helps, though, if they have a church affiliation, where the people really go out of their way to welcome them. It's kind of a big group hug in a way. I went to a meeting in a big university in Seoul and the leader of the meeting was a North Korean who had

become a minister. The meeting was about how do you get along, what are the difficulties you are having... and he was bolstering his advice with Scripture. It was very low key, not overbearing. I'm not a Christian so I have kind of a long view on it, but really, it was comforting: "It says here, one should do thus, and how do we apply this Scripture?"

SU: We have the idea that the North is like 1984, or Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, where family ties are deliberately destroyed, yet we see in the film the girl whose brother carries her across the border into China. Did you sense that they'd had a real, personal life in the North?

NC: Oh, yes. Family is very important and I was surprised to see some families with three kids. Here we would feel that we couldn't afford more than two, but the Asian family values are still very strong. The oldest son is responsible and that's why he gives his life, out of that filial devotion. The idea of Juche, the extreme national self-reliance that the Kims invented, draws on that sense of absolute devotion to the father, and it plays off of the Confucian ideas of family devotion.

SU: Like Mao did in China.

NC: And Stalin. Actually it's more Stalin than anything else... worse than Stalin. But it mixes in the Korean ideal of family loyalty. You know, the singer who gets trafficked in China... her thing was to be near her mother and her sister. That's all she cared about. Seeing her sister raped in front of her was beyond what she could endure. So, when you see the sacrifices that some of these people make for their families you realize that family is very strong, in spite of the state.

SU: Did she make it as a singer in the South?

NC: She did for a while. She was in an all North Korean group and they did concerts and were on television. They had some notoriety. But then it turned out that her manager was a crook. So she had her experience with the other way, which can also be horrible. The last time I saw her she was singing at private parties and other small venues. So she's still making it as a singer. And she got her daughter out of China. She's a very strong person. Her daughter is in first grade. She's very proud. But when we talked to her for the film she wouldn't talk about her mother or her sister.

SU: When the refugees look back at their time in the prison camps do they see their imprisonment as a political situation or do they see it as just a cynical way to get foreign currency with slave labor?

NC: They didn't really comment on that. I think that when you are in one of those camps you just want to get through a day.

SU: You show a man who was arrested by the Chinese for helping refugees and ends up in a Chinese prison for four years.

NC: He was a South Korean Christian who hoped to rescue a hundred people and make a big splash in the media. He wanted to draw world attention to the plight of the refugees. He and

another Christian man were working on it together. It was a very complex operation using people from three different parts of China. Somebody snitched and everybody ran off in different directions. He stayed and tried to hold it together. So he was arrested and imprisoned. In his ten-hour work day his job was to sprinkle asbestos on paper flowers to make them fireproof. The flowers will end up as wedding decorations. He'll end up with lung problems.

SU: Have you thought about how *Kimjongilia* might be used in education?

NC: My husband showed it to an audience of high school students at Sundance and the response was overwhelming. Kids in America understand that if they want to play the trombone their mom will get one and they can take lessons. If a girl wants to see a movie on Friday night she can just go. It boggled their imaginations to think of living in a country where you would have no choices at all.

SU: In the interviews you get a sense that there was an odd, even bizarre, residual sense of worshipping the Dear Leader.

NC: Well they all ridicule that life, but the one musician says that he knows that if he was back in the North he would be worshipping him. I asked them to sing the school song about worshipping Kim Il Song that they learned as little children and sang every day. Every one of them put on the bright smile and turned into that little kid. They started singing it and it was like, snap-back! you know, how you go to your parents' house and turn into the little kid again? I'll put that on the extra features in the DVD version. But when they were talking about it they all repudiated it.

SU: Do the refugees talk much about the family that they have left behind?

NC: Some of them can't find their families, which means they have probably been taken away. Kang, who is a well-known musician in the South, is a primary spokesman for the refugees and he believes that if anything happens to him or his family it will resonate badly for the North. Given to what just happened to the two American journalists, I'm not so sure. That resonated badly for the North but they don't seem to mind. They are going a bit wild up there right now. I'm not sure that anyone is safe.

SU: Do you get any sense of a shared political stance among the refugees? It was surprising how positive some of them were about the possibilities of the future.

NC: Isn't it wonderful? It attests to the power of the human spirit. Somebody asked me yesterday, "Wasn't this a depressing movie to make?" I said, you know in the end the human spirit is indomitable and I find that inspiring. I found my subjects to be inspiring.

SU: Your use of the two dancers to enhance the story is powerful and unique.

NC: I'm glad you saw it that way. My desire was to give the refugees a voice, since nobody knows about them, right? But at the same time I wanted to give an emotional release. There is no footage of the things they are talking about. There's no film of the camps or of the dreadful

starvation. We felt that that just hearing the stories is almost too much to bear because when you imagine the horror that these people live with, you need some kind of catharsis.

SU: The woman in the uniform is a well-known modern dancer.

NC: Incredible isn't she? And the other one is a ballerina who does classical Korean dance. They are both South Korean.

SU: In the film, all of the refugees who are stuck in China, or who are trying to get to another country, get helped by Christians.

NC: The only people I hear about doing it are Christians. It's a mission and I've actually met a number of Korean-American college students who are going over. As we now know, it is very dangerous work. There are lots of Christian churches in that part of China... well, all over China now. A lot of the churches in that area are actually ethnic Korean churches. Part of the reason that the North Koreans are so anti-Christian is not just the religion, but the political implications of freeing people from oppression. The church is the only underground organization that is functioning in North Korea to help refugees. If a North Korean is found to have been helped by the church, or admits to being a Christian, they get executed. What I have to explain to American audiences is that the concept of missionary in Korea is much different than what we see as colonial times and are negative about it... and ashamed of in some cases. You know, the way they treated natives. For Koreans, missionaries were heroes and freedom fighters who provided safe haven in the war against Japanese colonialism. It just has a whole different feel about it. One woman in the film says that people say there is no God in Korea, but that her family has been Christian for generations. Her first contact for getting out was a Chinese Korean minister who had some kind of connections in the North.

SU: Did he meet her inside North Korea?

NC: Yes. He knew her father and I think he was an escapee himself. There is actually an intricate set of connections with people inside and outside. He gave her a cell phone because if you are five or ten miles from the Chinese border you can get coverage with the Chinese phone company. That's how they planned her escape. They got a guide to get her across the river and the minister picked her up in a car and took her to the church. That's where they tell refugees to go because it's somewhat safe and the ministers will protect them. Eventually they have to leave because it's too becomes too dangerous so they went to Mongolia, but her sister was taken and it didn't work out too well for them. She's one of the ones who doesn't know what happened to her mother, and I think that there was a little brother... so there you are.

SU: Why do the Mongolians take them in?

NC: They are a democratic country. After the Soviet Union fell they didn't need to be a part of that whole communist thing and they didn't need to collaborate any more. They tell the refugees not to go to the villages but to go to a guard or police officer who will put them in detention. Then they can go through channels to get to South Korea. The South Koreans will help them.

SU: Did you find that your subjects wanted to speak about their ordeals? Did many people refuse to be interviewed?

NC: Almost all wanted to talk because they want the world to know their story. Not only do they go through all this hardship, but when they get out nobody is interested. There is lots of worldwide concern for Rwanda and Tibet, and Burma, where one of the leaders was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

SU: But you can take a camera into those places and show the footage on TV.

NC: Right, you can't take a camera into North Korea, and there are no pictures of the camps. It's a black hole. All we have are the testimonies of survivors.

RESPONSES

“A visually striking, inventively constructed documentary that intercuts grim testimony from North Korean defectors with a wide variety of unusual footage.” – *Kenneth Turan, LOS ANGELES TIMES*

“This documentary steals my breath. I am on the train watching it. I wish I could help these people.” – *Greta Van Susteren, FOX NEWS*

“Uses the filmmaker's special skills (there are interludes of interpretive dance) to tell the story of defectors from North Korea...” – *Michael Cieply, THE NEW YORK TIMES*

“Helmer N.C. Heikin orders up her indictment of the "Dear Leader" in a manner passionate and artistic, elevating fascinating, woeful facts into a wholly elevated realm.” – *John Anderson, VARIETY*

“I found I had difficulty speaking afterwards, it was so moving.” – *Penelope Pilou, VOICE OF AMERICA*

“...exposes the inexplicable insanity of hate, abuse, repression, megalomania, and greed.” – *Tom Gregory, HUFFINGTON POST*

“Not only is *Kimjongilia* a chilling portrait of totalitarianism, it is a remarkably well-crafted film.” – *Joe Bendel, THE EPOCH TIMES*