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Not Your Normal Dictatorship: PW Talks with Chung Min Lee

By Will Swarts | Sep 20, 2019

In *The Hermit King: The Dangerous Game of Kim Jong Un* (All Points, Nov.), Asia analyst Lee dissects North Korea.

What informs the book's level of detail about the Kim dynasty and the Pyongyang elite?



Photo: Mónica Raphael

Chung Min Lee

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Over the last several years, a growing pool of knowledge has become available —accounts from defectors, some increased access that's led to better accounts from Western journalists, and of course the close focus on U.S.-North Korean diplomacy, where Kim has really upped the ante, especially with the Trump administration.

That's a tale in itself, isn't it?

There's been a real yo-yo policy from Trump. If you're American, whether you're in Milwaukee or Washington, D.C., or on Wall Street, what kind of sense can you make of it? That's what compelled me to write this book.

Does anyone in Washington know what's happening in North Korea at this point?

There are a number of people who have watched North Korea over the last 10-plus years, and they're experts with really granular knowledge. They're in the State department, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community. But at a high policy level, I can't think of a single person who has a really good understanding. There really is a lack of senior officials with deep background and knowledge of North Korea.

You argue that Kim Jong Un is getting close to a point where his own people may see that his regime lacks legitimacy. How does that inform North Korea's stance toward its enemies and its allies?

You've got a regime that was created 70 years ago, a Mafia-esque criminal cartel, which also has weapons of mass destruction. It's not your normal dictatorship. It's got a siege mentality and a fear of the outside world that allows

Kim to keep power within the country, and it feeds on that fear by "standing up" to the U.S., Japan, and even China. That mentality makes it unique in the pantheon of nations, and its antiforeign element, particularly its anti-U.S.A. element, makes it a very special enemy of the United States.

How does this tangled geopolitical situation end well?

I chose to focus on one clear image in the book: *Tank Man*, the young man with the briefcase who stood down a column of People's Liberation Army tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989. He personifies a yearning for freedom for all people, regardless of the regimes they live under. Regardless of how harsh the regime is, how many gulags it has or how many people it oppresses, I believe there will be a brave man or woman who stands up. Of course, they will be squashed, but that person will live on as an icon of freedom in North Korea. I truly believe in my heart that that day will come. The weapons of mass destruction that Kim Jong Un fears the most aren't the military forces of the U.S. or Japan. It's that the voices of his people will keep standing up to his regime.

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