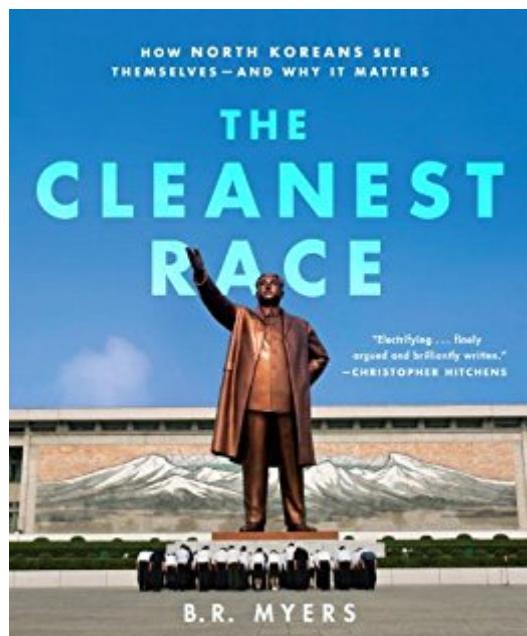


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The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves And Why It Matters



Synopsis

Understanding North Korea through its propaganda What do the North Koreans really believe? How do they see themselves and the world around them? Here B.R. Myers, a North Korea analyst and a contributing editor of The Atlantic, presents the first full-length study of the North Korean worldview. Drawing on extensive research into the regime's domestic propaganda, including films, romance novels and other artifacts of the personality cult, Myers analyzes each of the country's official myths in turn: "from the notion of Koreans' unique moral purity, to the myth of an America quaking in terror of the Iron General." In a concise but groundbreaking historical section, Myers also traces the origins of this official culture back to the Japanese fascist thought in which North Korea's first ideologues were schooled. What emerges is a regime completely unlike the West's perception of it. This is neither a bastion of Stalinism nor a Confucian patriarchy, but a paranoid nationalist, "military-first" state on the far right of the ideological spectrum. Since popular support for the North Korean regime now derives almost exclusively from pride in North Korean military might, Pyongyang can neither be cajoled nor bullied into giving up its nuclear program. The implications for US foreign policy "which has hitherto treated North Korea as the last outpost of the Cold War" are as obvious as they are troubling. With North Korea now calling for a "blood reckoning" with the "Yankee jackals," Myers' unprecedented analysis could not be more timely. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

I knew that B. R. Myers was a contributing editor, I believe, for "The Atlantic," my favorite periodical. I had no idea that he was also a student of the Korean Peninsula, especially the "Hermit Kingdom" north of the 38th parallel. Christopher Hitchens reviewed this book for "Slate" today, and after catching it this morning, I drove to my local Barnes & Noble in the vague hope they might have a copy. I was shocked that they had a copy in stock. And I was not able to put this fascinating book down. Myers objective is, by explaining North Korea in the roots of its modern past, to try to make some form recommendations as to how the world community can deal with this strange and blinkered land. His ultimate conclusion is, unfortunately, rather gloomy, arguing essentially that containment and "benevolent neglect" are the only methods to deploy against a regime that, by its own self-definition, is as fixed and unchangeable as a steel and cement mold. All this short of actual military confrontation no one exterior to North Korea wants. But, this is not the best part of the book. Myers advances and, I think, proves that North Korea is purely a product of its all-pervasive propaganda which literally soaks every aspect of daily life, twenty-four seven, learned in part from the brutal occupation tactics of the Japanese between 1905-1945. And this propaganda supports the two pillars of this Orwellian moonscape, the military and the Kim clan, arguably the most successful crime family since the fictional Corleones. North Korea is no longer properly understood as a "communist" society.

This is the rarest of books: a genuinely original analysis that demolishes most of what we thought we knew about something, in this case North Korea. For decades, virtually all of us have blithely assumed that North Korea's ideology was Juche, Stalinism, Confucianism, or some combination thereof. Myers makes a meticulously researched, closely reasoned argument that it is none of these things. On the contrary, the DPRK is an ethno-centric nationalist state led by a beloved, androgynous Parent Leader. In Pyongyang's world view, Koreans are a pure, childlike race, virtually incapable of sin, or of surviving in a world of vicious foreigners. Thankfully, the Great Leader -- the mother-like Kim Il Sung -- is there to protect them, followed by the even more maternal Kim Jong Il. These innocent people are constantly threatened, of course, by those vicious, cowardly, hook-nosed Americans, who must be resisted at all costs. This analysis is of great value in itself, but

it also has important policy implications, not the least of which is that since the Americans are the mortal enemies of the Korean people, genuine compromise with them on something like the DPRK's nuclear programs is unthinkable. Until recently, virtually the only books available in English on North Korea (or even South Korea) were the tendentious, self-indulgent polemics written by Bruce Cumings, professor of history at the University of Chicago. Cumings was largely discredited long ago, and Myers finishes the job. It is hard to imagine he will ever be taken seriously again.

North Korea's ideology is often mocked or dismissed but rarely examined in the west. Often it is simplified as 'Stalinist' but Stalinism refers to the oppression of the regime, not to the ideology that justifies it. In this slim volume (169 pages plus endnotes) author BR Myers painstakingly examines how North Korean ideology evolved from the end of World War II to the present and how it affects North Korea's behavior and world view. He explains that despite his Soviet loyalties Kim Il Sung had little knowledge of communism and when it came time to build a national ideology he turned to the one system he was familiar with, Japanese Imperialism. The comparisons between Japan's pre-war race-based ideology and North Korea's statements are striking. The legitimacy of the North Korean regime does not rest on liberating the workers of the world, quite the opposite. It builds its legitimacy on protecting the pure and innocent race of Korea and opposing the South, not because of politics, but because the South is a Yankee colony that allows its culture and blood to be defiled by foreign influences. Myer backs up this claim with citations from North Korean films, novels, posters and broadcasts - often reprinting the works for readers to see. He believes that understanding this worldview explains some of North Korea's irrational claims and policies. It also shows why North Korea is so reluctant to liberalize along the Chinese model; any step away from its ideology of purity could remove the regime's legitimacy. I have two frustrations with this book however. First Myers takes several shots at other scholars, these academic feuds distract from the subject.

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