

**3-chung sogisil ui amho: chon Yongguk chujae Pukhan kongsa Thae Yong Ho ui chungon** (Password of the Three-Story Secretariat: Testimony of Thae Yong Ho, Former Minister of the North Korean Embassy in Britain)

Thae Yong Ho (Kiparang, 2018) 542 pages, illustrations.

**Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado**

Thae Yong Ho,<sup>a</sup> minister of the embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) when he defected in 2016 with his family to the Republic of Korea (ROK), wrote after his intelligence investigation in Seoul a book that sold well and became the latest account of an elite defector to offer insights to analysts and others interested in Korean affairs.

In publishing his tale, Thae has joined a number of previous standouts in defector literature:

- Sin Sang Ok (Shin Sang-ok) a prominent ROK film director, and his wife, the movie star Choe Un Hui (Choi Eun-hee), following their separate 1978 abductions to the DPRK and subsequent Pyongyang film careers, escaped their minders at an Austrian film festival in 1986. Their account of their years in Pyongyang was an early open source of information on the character of leader Kim Jong Il, his love of cinema, and developments in the DPRK film industry.<sup>b</sup>
- Kim Hyon Sik, a professor of Russian with ties to the ruling Kim clan, defected in 1992 from Moscow. His subsequent book included inside information on the DPRK and revealing details on how the ROK Agency

for National Security Planning (NSP) had targeted, pitched, and exfiltrated him from the Soviet Union.<sup>c</sup>

- Hwang Jang Yop, widely credited as being the “father” of Pyongyang’s political ideology of Juche, wrote following his 1997 defection an autobiography that included details of political developments in Pyongyang under Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.<sup>d</sup>
- Fujimoto Kenji, Japanese sushi chef to Kim Jong Il and his family, published several books following his 2001 defection with information ranging from ground photographs of Kim’s country estates to firsthand information on the boyhood character of present leader Kim Jong Un.<sup>e</sup>

Thae Yong Ho’s book is an excellent addition to this body of literature in that it offers credible insights while largely avoiding claims that would fall outside the expected knowledge of a DPRK diplomat. Thae recounts his upbringing, education, and career, thereby giving us many details of Pyongyang’s foreign policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the structure, purposes, and exploitation of the DPRK’s system of education in foreign languages.

a. Korean, Japanese, and Chinese names in this review appear in traditional order, with surname preceding given name. Korean names are written according to Pyongyang’s variation on the standard McCune-Reischauer system. In some cases, Seoul’s variants follow between parentheses. The following: Korean book titles in this review are transliterated according to the McCune-Reischauer standard used by the Library of Congress and university libraries in their catalogs, minus the diacritical marks.

b. Choe Un Hui, Sin Sang Ok. *Kim Chong-il wangguk* (The Kingdom of King Jong Il) (Tonga Ilbosa, 1988). Each later wrote an autobiography with more details of their time in Pyongyang. Choe Un Hui, *Choe Un-hui ui kobaek* (Confessions of Choe Un Hui) (Random House Korea, 2007). Sin Sang Ok, *Nan, yonghwa yotta* (I Was Film) (Random House Korea, 2007).

c. Kim Hyon Sik. *Na nun 21-segi inyom ui yumongmin* (I Am a 21st-Century Nomad of Principle) (Kimyongsa, 2007). The NSP succeeded the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) and preceded today’s National Intelligence Service (NIS) as the leading ROK intelligence organization.

d. Hwang Jang Yop, *Na nun yoksa ui chilli rul poatta* (I Saw the Truth of History) (Hanul, 1999).

e. Fujimoto Kenji. *Kin Seinichi no ryorinin* (Kim Jong Il’s Chef) (Fusosha, 2003), *Kin Seinichi no shiseikatsu* (Kim Jong Il’s Private Life) (Fusosha, 2004), and *Kaku to onna wo aishita shogun-sama* (The General Who Loved Nuclear Weapons and Women) (Shogakukan, 2009). Perhaps the only defector from the Kim clan’s inner circle to go back to the DPRK, Fujimoto wrote of his 2012 return to Pyongyang, reunion with Kim Jong Un, introduction to spouse Ri Sol Ju, and the dissension that he witnessed in the presence of the new leader. See Fujimoto Kenji. *Hikisakareta yakusoku* (A Promise Torn Apart) (Kodansha, 2012).

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

Thae was born in 1962 in Pyongyang to a family that, while relatively comfortable, was not in the cadre class of families that enjoyed privileges from their connections to the Kim clan or to the partisans who had fought under Kim Il Sung against the Japanese prior to Korea's liberation in 1945. At the end of elementary school, a key moment in an education system where middle school largely determines a child's future as an adult, Thae's ambitious mother overrode her husband's doubts in 1974 and sent her son to the Pyongyang Foreign Language Institute (PFLI)<sup>a</sup> to specialize in English. (482) Two years later, Pyongyang sent him as part of a group to learn English in China, leading in 1978 to the placement of Thae and his classmates in a middle school attached to the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). Pyongyang recalled them short of graduation in 1980 in reaction to Beijing's reforms and criticism of Mao Zedong in the years after his death in 1976. (429)

In 1980, Thae entered Pyongyang's University of International Relations (UIR). Most of his classmates were older, having completed their military service before enrollment, but Thae was part of a group from PFLI and regional language schools that started immediately after senior middle school. (429) At UIR, in addition to courses in international law and other standard academic courses, students prepared for careers as Pyongyang's "diplomatic warriors" in "war without the sound of gunfire" by reading of the exploits of the Soviet intelligence officer Richard Sorge and the intelligence operatives of the Imperial Japanese Army's Nakano School in books that Kim Jong Il had personally donated. UIR instructors urged their students to sacrifice themselves for the Fatherland, as intelligence officers of the Nakano School had done for Japan.<sup>b</sup> (436) On graduating UIR in 1984, Thae returned to Beijing for another four years at BFSU before receiving orders in 1988 for the MFA Department of European Affairs.

Thae began his diplomatic career at the Cold War's end. Within a few years, the Berlin Wall fell; Moscow's

Eastern Bloc collapsed; the Soviet Union disappeared; and both Beijing and Moscow established full diplomatic relations with Seoul. The DPRK—failing to refashion its diplomacy and economy quickly enough for the new times—descended into isolation, economic devastation, and widespread famine. Pyongyang's diplomats abroad worked desperately, at times illegally, to secure hard currency, food, and other aid for the regime. Thae, at one point in his time working at the DPRK embassy in Denmark (1996–98), scored a major triumph in obtaining a donation of 3,200 tons of feta cheese from a Danish manufacturer for his famished countrymen. (488)

From his success in Denmark, Thae went to work at the embassy in Sweden (1998–2000). Following a stint from 2000 to 2004 in the MFA's Department of European Affairs, where he was responsible for Britain and northern Europe, Thae served at the embassy in Britain from 2004 to 2008 as counselor. After serving in Pyongyang from 2008 to 2013 as vice director of the Department of European Affairs, Thae returned to London in April 2013 as minister, the embassy's second position.

Fluent in English and experienced in British affairs, Thae worked on tasks both great and small. As such, he was part of the delegation that traveled to London for the signing in December 2000 of the document establishing relations between Britain and the DPRK.<sup>c</sup> In 2015, he showed Kim Jong Chol, older brother of Pyongyang's incumbent leader Kim Jong Un, the sights around London and took the enthusiastic fan of guitar legend Eric Clapton to two concerts in what was a secret trip before the ever-alert Japanese press spotted him on the first night. (394)

Thae defected with his wife and children from London to Seoul in 2016, apparently driven by personal ambition, a strong will, fear of punishment, and disapproval of the regime he had served as a diplomat for nearly 30 years. Seeking advantage for his family, Thae had arranged his life and bent or broken the rules multiple times to have both his sons with him on overseas assignments and to

---

a. In addition to the PFLI, also known as the Pyongyang Foreign Languages School, Thae refers to sister schools in Chongjin, Hamhung, and Sinuiju. The schools feature six-year programs that train students in foreign languages during the equivalent of the junior and senior high school years of US students.

b. Kim Jong Il, relaxing one day with Fujimoto on a firing range, lauded his chef's marksmanship as worthy of an operative of the Nakano School. See Fujimoto, *Kin Seinichi no ryorinin*, 97. For a history of the Nakano School, see my *Shadow Warriors of Nakano* (Potomac Books, 2002).

c. James Hoare, Britain's first charge d'affaires in Pyongyang, engaged Thae for years in the establishment of diplomatic relations. See James E. Hoare and Susan Pares. *North Korea in the 21st Century: An Interpretive Guide* (Global Oriental, 2005).

educate them in Europe.<sup>a</sup> Many of his friends and colleagues had suffered in the course of Pyongyang's many purges. His father-in-law, a general, was close to Jang Song Thaek (145), a connection that must have posed a threat to the Thae family's future after Kim Jong Un had Jang executed in December 2013. When Thae managed to bring his older son from Pyongyang to London in March the following year to join the rest of the family, he was at that point in a position to defect. (411)

Thae omits from his book all details of his actual defection, only mentioning briefly that the NIS interrogated him until the end of December 2016. (15) Nor does he dwell on his brief employment as a researcher with the NIS-affiliated Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS).<sup>b</sup>

What the author does give us in this book are credible insights into areas within his purview. One of Pyongyang's leading diplomats for British affairs, Thae writes of Kim Jong Il seeking diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom to escape diplomatic isolation and deter attack from the United States. Thae describes how Pyongyang saw establishing diplomatic relations with London as part of a larger effort to shift from its previous policy of global revolution and focus on the non-aligned movement to one of deterring a US military attack by greater engagement with Europe. (66) Particularly interesting is Kim's view that British participation had been

essential to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and that diplomatic ties with Britain lessened the odds of the United States striking North Korea. Also, once Pyongyang established its embassy in London, DPRK diplomats engaged British officials and experts outside the government, putting Pyongyang's points across and eliciting British views on developments in Washington. (238)

Another area of insight is the MFA itself. Thae gives various details regarding the ministry, from training to regulations to its various components. Then there is the field of education in foreign languages, where Thae offers a myriad of details, such as President Hafez al-Assad making available training in Arabic in Syria to North Korean students in 1974 in appreciation for DPRK military support. (418) We learn that PFLI students of English in the author's student days were learning from British textbooks and watching such films as *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*. (488) From Thae, we read that students learn foreign languages in preparation for operations in intelligence as well as in diplomacy.<sup>c</sup>

Books from defectors provide insights and a wealth of details on Korean affairs. Together with publications by foreigners with firsthand knowledge of the DPRK and the daily stream of journalism in and beyond the Korean Peninsula, they are a key tributary of the river of open sources on Pyongyang matters.



*The reviewer:* Stephen C. Mercado is a retired CIA open source officer. He enjoys reading intelligence literature in several languages.

a. Thae and his wife had wished to have their second child three years after the first one but waited seven years in order to bring them both overseas with them under the regulations for the schooling of the young children of diplomats in Pyongyang. Several years later, flouting a regulation that required flying from Beijing to his new post in London, Thae decided to broaden his family's horizons with a leisurely transcontinental train trip, including stops in Warsaw, Berlin, and Paris, before reaching the British capital.

b. Thae resigned from the INSS in May 2018, days after this book became a best seller. See "High-Profile Defector Quits State-Sponsored Job" (*Korea Joong Ang Daily*, May 24, 2018, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3048523>). Still ambitious and willful, Thae then ran for public office, winning a seat from Seoul in the National Assembly in 2020.

c. Kim Hyon Hui, one of the two operatives implicated in the DPRK's 1987 bombing of Korean Air Flight 858, had been one year ahead of Thae at PFLI before later graduating from the Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies (PUFS) as a specialist in Japanese.