

Hyeonseo Lee with David John, *The Girl with Seven Names* (William Collins, 2015)

Hyeonseo Lee left North Korea on a youthful lark in 1997. In 2013, she became possibly the most famous defector from that country after her TED talk championing human rights went viral. The three parts of her memoir, *The Girl with Seven Names*, cover her life in North Korea, her life as an illegal immigrant in China and her final settlement in South Korea where she is finally joined by her family. That Lee's defection from one of the most repressive, closed societies on Earth was an accident is just one of many ironies threaded throughout her memoir.

Lee lived a comfortable existence in North Korea, afforded by her *songbun* – a classification system based on loyalty to the regime. Her family's *songbun* allowed her father a military rank and her mother a middle-class job, but it also allowed a certain freedom to bend the rules of the totalitarian nation. Lee's family were trusted to live along the Chinese border, and there a culture of capitalist endeavour – founded on smuggling between the two communist countries – is tacitly encouraged. Markets fill the cracks in North Korea's centrally-planned economy; illicit imports undergird the failed ideology of *Juche* – self-reliance; and the drug trade provides the government with foreign currency.

Her mother's involvement in this trade insulated her from the great famine of the late nineties, but it also exposed them to constant risk. North Korea is, after all, a country where people can be publicly executed for not crying enough and where suicide is considered an act of defection that will result in a whole family being marked as traitors. The system relies on people breaking the law, but this leaves them ever vulnerable to the changing tides of policy or some petty denunciation – in a strange reverse confession, citizens are expected to denounce each other's disloyal behaviour publicly once per week. The caste system, the denunciations and the culture of fear make people 'complicit in a brutal system' (150); people are forced to repress others, as 'only the ruthless and the selfish ... survive' (38), and to repress themselves, as 'everyone wears a [metaphorical] mask' for self-protection (20). It is likely no coincidence that one of the few years to be explicitly mentioned in Lee's memoir is 1984, as she lived a life with an uncanny resemblance to George Orwell's famous novel. In these circumstances, even Lee's wearing of fashionable shoes could have marked her as a disloyal. Because of her relative freedoms, Lee was able to illegally slip across the border; because of the repressive and unpredictable system of control in North Korea, it quickly became unsafe to return.

The most fascinating part of Lee's memoir is this first third, which lifts the veil on the repressive North Korean nation. As one of the rare detailed accounts of life in the state, *The Girl with Seven Names* is a must-read for anyone with an interest in the Korean Peninsula. However, the second section, covering Lee's travels in China, is an all-too-common story. There is a level of tension as Lee brushes up close against refugees who are either forcefully repatriated or exploited in the sex trade, and many events are a personal culmination of geopolitical forces that will demand contemplation from the thoughtful reader. However, the text itself is largely a just-the-facts account with functional writing and little introspection. That said, the final section does offer a final, intriguing irony, as Lee and her family try to find a place in this new world. While many defectors leave in desperation, due to the famine or political exile, Lee's family had a stable life. In South Korea, they find themselves to be

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social outcasts without a way of making a true home. While Lee has devoted herself to gaining the education she was denied and to promoting a freer North Korea, she is also left with uncertainties about what she and her family have lost.

Andrew Craig
Flinders University