

Revolution In The Sky

Park Sang Hak is trying to bring freedom to North Korea, one balloon at a time



The Korean DMZ

How do you get decent propaganda into the least connected place in the world?



Technology:
Balloons

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In the 1990s, North Korea began accepting trash for processing from Europe. In the trash was a trove of information about the outside world in the form of audio and video tapes. The government went to great lengths to confiscate all of it.



Near the DMZ
in South Korea,
a balloon nears
launch

Park Sang Hak rides in a minivan down the highway, speeding past signs for Pyongyang. “That’s North Korea, over there,” he says, pointing past a razor wire fence, across the Imjin estuary, to a pastoral green landscape beyond. The van pulls into a parking lot, where Park greets the rest of his team from the Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK). They are all defectors from the North. There are his mother, his sister-in-law, and his wife, who wears a purple anorak and matching full-face plastic visor to protect her from the sun. At the wheel of a small blue cargo truck is his younger brother. Marching across the asphalt at double-time are members of a like-minded volunteer group, the People’s Liberation Front (PLF), six men and three women who represent the shock troops in the day’s operation. Former officers in the North Korean army, clad in berets and gray-camouflage fatigues, they’d seem more intimidating if the women’s combat boots did not have high heels.

Park has spent the past 10 years trying to end decades of totalitarian rule in North Korea. The principal weapons in his campaign against the Kim dynasty and its myrmidons in Pyongyang? Balloons.

A cold wind cuts across the parking lot as Park oversees launch preparations. A truck bearing scarlet cylinders of hydrogen pulls up. From the cargo van, PLF members help unpack boxes of balloons and 20 plastic bags filled with a mixture of DVDs, U.S. dollar bills, and booklets. Each bag weighs no more than 10 kilograms (22 pounds): the maximum payload of a single balloon. In all there are 200,000 two-page leaflets, printed in close-set type and made of feather-weight polyvinyl, as light as tissue paper but waterproof.

One pamphlet bears the first 10 articles of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Another denounces the Kim dynasty. The bags are secured by a tube containing a chemically operated timer; when the balloon has been aloft

long enough, the bags will fall open, dispensing Park’s messages from the sky above the North.

“North Korea is surrounded by an iron curtain, so information can’t get in,” Park says. “But this way, using the sky, it can’t be stopped.” By breaking the information blockade around the North, Park hopes to encourage his former countrymen to overthrow their leaders. “We can raise their consciousness and leave it up to them to decide whether to fight or not.”

Park’s mother and sister-in-law tie two bundles of leaflets to each balloon and, with a screech of high-pressure gas, fill them with hydrogen. The balloons, 33 feet long and 7 feet wide, lift slowly into the air, some bearing slogans in colored Korean characters. The PLF wrangle each one across the asphalt, the wind swiping at their backs as they wait for the signal to launch. Park struggles to tie a banner—a cartoon depicting a sweaty Kim Jong Un clutching a nuclear missile like a toddler gripping a security blanket—to the tail of the last balloon. Then he gives his final orders.

“Concentrate! Focus!” he shouts. “Together! One, two—” Five balloons rocket skyward, midday light flashing off their transparent plastic envelopes, the bundles of propaganda spinning on their cables. Rising swiftly, taken by the wind, they grow smaller and smaller until they’re swallowed by the glare of the sun. If everything goes as planned, they’ll be over Pyongyang in four hours.

Park, 46, is slight and wiry, with a thick wedge of black hair and an aura of nervous energy. When he leaves his home in a southern suburb of Seoul, he’s usually accompanied by one or two plainclothes police detectives, who chauffeur him around in a modest four-door Hyundai. He receives regular death threats—by e-mail, phone, and, with a flair for the anachronistic that seems uniquely North Korean, fax. “The country code is always

from China,” Park says. But he knows who’s paying the bill. Since he began launching balloons in 2004, his exploits have made him such an irritant to the Pyongyang regime that five years ago North Korean state television anointed him Target Zero, above even No. 1 on its hit list of enemies of the state.

“I’ve been on TV 500 times in three years,” he says. People recognize him in restaurants, and he has to disguise himself when he goes hiking. He likes to say that he’s as much of a celebrity in South Korea as he is in the North. When I ask if he receives government funding, he laughs. Each launched balloon costs about \$500, but unlike other defector groups, the FFNK receives no money from the state. “No, we have a couple of hundred people who give us five or ten dollars a month. None of the people who donate to us are rich.”

Three years ago a fellow defector called, offering to broker a meeting with a supporter who could provide funding for launches. The South Korean National Intelligence Service told him it was a trap and ended up capturing four men at the rendezvous point, a subway station in Seoul. One of them, a defector known only as Ahn, had served in the North Korean special forces and was carrying an arsenal of assassination gadgets, including a miniature flashlight that fired bullets, a pen that shot steel darts, and another containing a needle that delivered a lethal toxin. Ahn later admitted to having been paid \$12,000 by the North Koreans to murder Park. They’d threatened to harm his family if he didn’t go through with it.

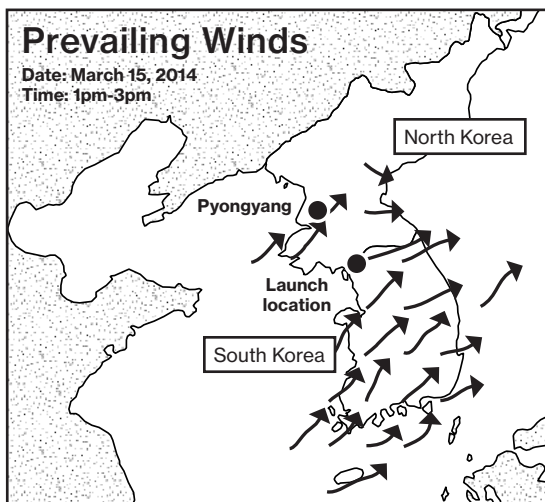
Park remains unfazed about the prospect of dying for his cause. He knows he’s doing a good job when the number of plainclothes men around him doubles, as it does from time to time. If the agents of Pyongyang do finally get him, he says, someone else

Park protesting in Seoul

A 2011 balloon release



FROM LEFT: KIM KYUNG HOON/REUTERS; PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FERGUSON FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK



will carry on launching balloons. “Even if Park Sang Hak was killed,” he says, “there will be Park Sang Hak numbers two and three.”

In North Korea, Park’s father, Park Gun Hee, was a member of the ruling Worker’s Party, a senior official in the regime’s Science and Technology Bureau, and later, a general in the 35th Bureau, North Korea’s foreign intelligence agency. The eldest of three children, Sang Hak was born in the mountain city of Hyesan, which faces China across the Yalu River. In places near his home, the banks of the Yalu were only 65 feet apart, so as a teenager Park could share shouted conversations with citizens of Changbai, across the water in China. In the early 1980s he noticed changes in Changbai: Crude huts were being replaced by well-built concrete houses. When Park asked his foreign neighbors what was going on, they credited Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms. In the winter of 1985, when he turned 17, Park walked across the frozen river and wandered the streets of Changbai. He was shocked to see people wearing American clothes and talking with admiration about the U.S.

At 18, Park moved to Pyongyang to study electrical engineering. In 1992 he saw his first leaflets from the South. He and his graduating university class were on a trip in Wonsan, a port on the Sea of Japan, when they caught sight of two huge spherical balloons, 30 to 50 feet across, floating toward them, hundreds of feet in the air. They were propaganda balloons, which the government in Seoul had been sending over the border for decades. As Park watched, one balloon drifted away, but the

second kept coming. When it was just overhead there was a loud bang, and hundreds of leaflets drifted down from the sky, papering the public square around them. Soldiers tried to stop the crowds from picking up the leaflets, but there was too much paper and too many people.

Park took a leaflet. Reading it later that night, he discovered pictures of bikini-clad girls cavorting on the beach at Busan—but also news of Kang Chol Hwan and An Hyuk, former prisoners in North Korea’s infamous Yodok concentration camp who’d

recently defected.

After a six-month postgraduate course in propaganda techniques, he landed an excellent job in the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League. While private ownership of a car was unthinkable even for a party member, the department nonetheless gave him full-time use of a rather nice Toyota Crown, which he was allowed to keep at home. He loved his work. He got engaged. His prospects looked superb.

Under the Pyongyang regime, watching unsanctioned foreign media was illegal, and offenders were sent to the gulag. Government censors staged raids on homes across the country to seize movies and recordings. According to Kim Hueng Kang, director of North Korean Intellectuals Solidarity, a research group of academics, engineers, and doctors who have defected to the South, before each raid the censors would cut off electricity to entire villages to trap tapes and discs in the machines where they were playing. North Korean citizens began keeping two radios at home—one to show the censors, the other to listen to—and they powered CD players with car batteries and generators to dodge the tactics of the secret police.

By the end of 1993 even the most well-insulated North Korean *nomenklatura* couldn’t fail to see that something had gone quite wrong. The end of Soviet aid, a series of natural disasters, a famine, and the failings of the planned economy transformed the misfortunes of life under the Kim regime into a national catastrophe. Park Gun Hee, who by then was posted in Tokyo, warned his son that things would have to change. “My father began telling me that this was a state that was going to collapse, and if it’s not going to collapse imminently,

it’s one that we have to escape from,” Park says.

In the early hours of Aug. 21, 1999, Park, along with his brother, sister, and mother, held hands and waded into the Yalu in Hyesan. He left his fiancée behind. From China, they flew on counterfeit passports to Seoul, where they were met by South Korean intelligence agents. On the drive from Gimpo Airport, Park was surprised by the sight of so many cars streaming into the city, down the expressways that ribboned across the landscape. Amazing, he thought, that there were so many elite members of the party with cars to drive to work every morning. “Even then,” he says, “I didn’t quite grasp the situation in South Korea.”

Park got a job in the mobile technology research department of Seoul National University. The government was thoughtful enough to find him a position that took into account his engineering background—though perhaps not in exactly the kind of role he’d have liked. The job was in human resources. It turned out that everything he’d learned at Pyongyang’s most prestigious technical institute was 20 years out of date.

Park lived comfortably in Seoul for three years before he found activism. He’d remained ignorant of the fate of members of his extended family left behind in the North until another defector from Hyesan contacted him in Seoul in February 2003. In the weeks after his flight, Park was told, the authorities had sent his two uncles to a gulag, where they were executed. His cousins had been left to fend for themselves on the street. (Park’s father remained in Japan.)

Park quit his job and teamed up with the defectors he’d read about as a student, An and Kang. Together they formed a pressure group to draw attention to the fate of North Koreans. They traveled to the U.S. and testified before Congress about the camp system and the Kim regime. Park took part in protests in Tokyo and Seoul; he was arrested after sneaking into a summit

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학업유망 '높이 내린다'의 주안점을 둔 '만수대예단'의 무용수 고영희(일명홍승성)가 아닙니다. 아버지 권철 일촌인(일촌은 족제) 상재권을 비롯한 많은 여성들을 가까이 했다는 고영희 역시 집정부 기권조, 복직에 자주 불려가 기권조였다. 여성 중 한사람입니다.

김정은은 친형인 김정철과 여동생인 김정남처럼 국비지원에 자금을 지원받았던 나라인 스위스 베른에서 오랜 기간 유학했으며 여
비자의 초조했던 병정에서 물러나는 몸조성인인물과는 정반대로 세상의 모든 부귀와 영광을 다 누린 천재인 '김'씨 일
가다

북간지갑씨와조세습증서의 가정과 의전에 손꼽살고 있는 북조선의 부모형제들이여, 온 세상이 비웃고 있다. 29살 나이에
숨이가 연연의 수월, 희고검도자나니? 민족회복의 문헌입니다.

필북자들의 전희대 "자유분하우들연합" (조선인민해방전쟁)