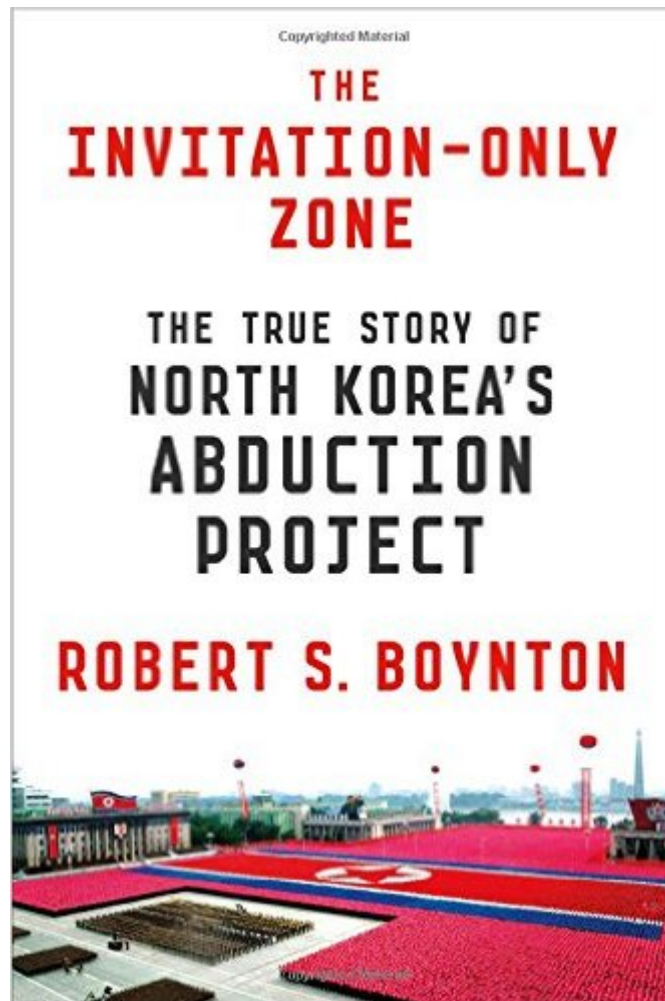


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# The Invitation-Only Zone: The True Story Of North Korea's Abduction Project



## Synopsis

A bizarre, little-known tale about the most secretive culture on earth. For decades, North Korea denied any part in the disappearance of dozens of Japanese citizens from Japan's coastal towns and cities in the late 1970s. But in 2002, with his country on the brink of collapse, Kim Jong-il admitted to the kidnapping of thirteen people and returned five of them in hopes of receiving Japanese aid. As part of a global espionage project, the regime had attempted to reeducate these abductees and make them spy on its behalf. When the scheme faltered, the captives were forced to teach Japanese to North Korean spies and make lives for themselves, marrying, having children, and posing as North Korean civilians in guarded communities known as "Invitation-Only Zones"—the fiction being that they were exclusive enclaves, not prisons. From the moment Robert S. Boynton saw a photograph of these men and women, he became obsessed with their story. Torn from their homes as young adults, living for a quarter century in a strange and hostile country, they were returned with little more than an apology from the secretive regime. In *The Invitation-Only Zone*, Boynton untangles the bizarre logic behind the abductions. Drawing on extensive interviews with the abductees, Boynton reconstructs the story of their lives inside North Korea and ponders the existential toll the episode has had on them, and on Japan itself. He speaks with nationalists, spies, defectors, diplomats, abductees, and even crab fishermen, exploring the cultural and racial tensions between Korea and Japan that have festered for more than a century. A deeply reported, thoroughly researched book, *The Invitation-Only Zone* is a riveting story of East Asian politics and of the tragic human consequences of North Korea's zealous attempt to remain relevant in the modern world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I own around 20 books on North and South Korea and have borrowed several more through the library. It's a bit of an obsession. Last year, I read "A Kim Jong-il Production" by Paul Fischer, about what is probably the most famous abduction case in North Korea's brief-but-far-too-long history. In that book, which mostly focused on a kidnapped South Korean actress and film director, several references were made to other victims of North Korea's abduction project. In other words, for me "The Invitation-Only Zone" made a brilliant companion piece, expanding my knowledge of this topic and filling out the story, which is almost too disturbing to believe (apparently, it WAS too disturbing to believe for many in Japan, until the evidence became too obvious to ignore any longer). To be fair, this is actually about much more than the "abduction project" mentioned in the subtitle. Boynton takes us deep into the long and often troubled relationship between Japan and Korea and helps us begin to understand the "logic" behind the kidnapping of Japanese citizens to North Korea. It will never cease to bother me that such a place as the DPRK can exist. None of us can afford to ignore its existence, however. The Invitation-Only Zone, like many of the books in its field, does us a great service by opening our eyes to some of the strangest circumstances a human being has ever been forced to endure, and perhaps more importantly--it opens our eyes to the fact that it is possible to SURVIVE such circumstances. Thank you, Mr. Boynton, for an excellent read.

North Korea: if it weren't terrifying, it would just be News of the Weird. And maybe it's both. The Invitation-Only Zone has unearthed a history once believed to be urban myth: the broad-daylight abduction of Japanese citizens who then spent a lifetime in a weird form of captivity under...EXTREMELY...weird circumstances in NK. Somehow the author dug up the facts here and I couldn't stop turning the pages. Almost without noticing I also finally got some understanding of Japanese-Korean history and current relationships. Brilliant book.

Having read quite a few accounts of North Korea, I found "The Invitation-Only Zone" a unique look into a program that is often briefly highlighted in other books. The Abduction Project pursued by North Korea in the latter part of the twentieth-century appears to be something ripped from the pages of a novel. Mr. Boynton does a superb job of highlighting both the details and scope of the project, all the while humanising those who were affected by it in one way or another. Aside from the abduction program, Mr. Boynton goes on to put the program into a larger geopolitical context. He provides a thorough, interesting account of the history of Korea that led to the ultimate creation of Kim Il Sung's "Juche" ideology. Especially considering recent events over the past few years, I

consider this a great introductory book for anyone looking to learn about the psyche of the North Korean regime that has remained closed off from the rest of the world during the twentieth century. The accounts are alarming, thought-provoking, and occasionally entertaining. A short, quick read, it is suitable for those looking who have no basic knowledge of the regime to those looking for an overview of this fascinating subject.

In this example of what he calls the "new new journalism" - supposedly an advance on Tom Wolfe's 1970s theory about the then-new, full-immersion, long-form, literary version - the author explores the hidden meanings of multi-culturalism in countries where cultural "purity" counts for everything. The story's allure lies in its central narrative about North Korea kidnapping Japanese and other citizens to further some bizarre political strategy. But its heart is in his examination of the subtleties of colonisation of a different kind - between races that are similar. "Traditional" colonisation happened between advanced white European countries and "distant" native populations of a different skin colour. In the case of Korea and Japan (and China, the third part of the equation) the commonality of origins and absence of sharply distinguishing physical and cultural differences have made for a fascinating interplay whose boundaries shift continuously. The author declares in his after-word that his being an American who spoke neither Japanese nor Korean worked to his advantage in trying to unravel a complex phenomenon whose players are all too reluctant to speak openly about how they interact. Only an outsider could have persuaded them to part with so many revelations. It is a painstaking piece of work and reveals a intriguing aspect of international relations. It fails to fully explain why the abductions happened, but that in itself somehow fits the overall mystery.

In the course of telling this story - a story almost too strange to be true - the author takes us through important elements of the inter-relationship between Korea and Japan post-Meiji - we really don't see why until the story completes; as the author notes, he didn't realize how important this was either. The telling of this history with the story of the abductions is not meant to excuse the acts, nor is the introduction of numerous Leftist characters. (If you read the fiction or history in fiction books by W. F. Buckley you will know that communists all come from somewhere very human; they are not really spawn of Satan). The only disappointment is one I am sure the author shares: why did the kidnappings happen? For what purpose? There are many who speculate but we may never know. The return of abductees is central to Japanese politics these days; it should also be noted that many non-Japanese were also abducted, and many many more duped into going North and never

being allowed to leave again.

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