



presents

BEYOND UTOPIA

Directed By Madeleine Gavin



English | 115 min

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LOGLINE

A suspenseful look at the lengths people will go to gain freedom, BEYOND UTOPIA embeds with a courageous pastor as he works tirelessly to guide various individuals attempting to flee one of the most oppressive places on Earth: North Korea.

SYNOPSIS

A suspenseful, riveting portrait of the lengths people will go to gain freedom, BEYOND UTOPIA follows various individuals as they attempt to flee North Korea, one of the most oppressive places on Earth, a land they grew up believing was a paradise. At the film's core is a courageous pastor, a man of God on a mission to help a mother reunite with the child she was forced to leave behind, and a family of five — including small children and an elderly grandmother — embarking on a treacherous journey into the hostile mountains of China and through southeast Asia. Leaving their homeland is fraught with unimaginable danger — yet these individuals are driven to take the risk. Gripping, thrilling, and never more timely, Madeleine Gavin's award-winning film embeds the viewer with the subjects as they attempt their perilous escape, palpably conveying life-or-death stakes. The result is a singular, heart-pounding, and unforgettable experience.

Q&A WITH DIRECTOR

How did this project come together?

Our producers, Jana Edelbaum and Rachel Cohen had secured the rights to Hyeonseo Lee's memoir, *The Girl With Seven Names*, about her defection from North Korea over 20 years ago. They came to me and asked me to direct a film centered around this. Initially I said I didn't think I was the person who should make the film. I didn't have a personal connection to North Korea and I knew for certain that I wouldn't be interested in making a biopic. But they encouraged me to investigate further. Over the next several months I ended up reading and watching everything I could find on North Korea. I also dug into the web, using VPNs and translating searching into many languages in order to dig as deeply as I could, uncovering hidden camera footage brought out of NK as well as North Korea's own depiction of itself in terms of its propaganda and the vast mythology they spoon-feed to their people. Over the next few months, my waking life and my dreaming life became more and more consumed with the world inside the North, and most importantly, the people living inside the mysterious country. It was shocking to learn how little their stories and their struggles had been communicated to the outside world. Several months into this process, I woke up one morning, something clicked in me, and I saw the movie that needed to be made.

What was your best resource for learning about the North Korean people?

There were several, but Barbara Demick's book, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* is a standout. She is one of a few Western journalists covering the country who has interviewed defectors on their lives inside North Korea. She's a beautiful writer and the book offers palpable insight into the people, how vital and strong they are in spite of the massive control from the Kim regime. The irony is, most of our news media shows us exactly what the Kim regime wants to show us – the missiles, parades etc. That is absolutely insane. To the extent that we see North Koreans depicted at all, it seems to be as one of two extremes: either as an anonymous mass listless from lack of food or as hearty robotic figures marching in unison. We don't see people with dreams, fears, passions or even thoughts – all qualities that make us human.

Hyeonseo was initially the main focus of your movie – what made her compelling after your initial meetings?

I had watched Hyeonseo's TedTalks and other interviews with her, but I felt I needed to find out who she was beyond who she was in those forums. By chance, she was coming to New York around that time and five minutes into dinner with her, I fell completely in love. Hyeonseo was so much more complex than the person I had seen online. She was full of specificity of experience, of personality, vulnerability and humor. And over the next two days, I interviewed her in a marathon interview session where she and I plumbed the depths of her memory in ways she said nobody had ever done before. I learned about her complex psychology as a defector – the tremendous guilt she bears. As she's said to me many times, whether she is in South Korea, the United States, or anywhere else on this planet, a part of her is still trapped inside North Korea, unable to get out. Ultimately, the film evolved into something else entirely and the balance of Hyeonseo's role shifted, but the material she and I were developing is incredibly compelling and is really another movie unto itself. In any case, those few days with Hyeonseo took everything to another level for me.

Pastor Kim also becomes a major character and force in the movie. How did you meet him?

When we started traveling to South Korea, little by little, things began opening up all around us. This culminated in meeting Pastor Kim, one of the most prominent members of the Underground Railroad for defectors. Pastor Kim is incredibly protective of his networks and of the people he's trying to help rescue. As a result, it took many months to get to know him and to gain his trust. Once that happened, however, Pastor Kim helped us take the project to unimaginable places. Ultimately, he gave us the opportunity to embed with and document two attempts at defection. No other film has ever entered that world the way we were able to and Pastor Kim was central to this happening.

How did you come to embed yourself with the Roh family as they journeyed from North Korea to Thailand?

After the Rohs fled North Korea and crossed the river into China, they roamed Changbai Mountain for five days with no idea where they were or where they were going. Eventually they came upon a farmer who contacted someone in Pastor Kim's network, who in turn contacted Pastor Kim himself. Pastor Kim's church is one of several that raises money to help defectors and PK asked his church if they would fund the family's escape attempt. As always, it was a very dangerous mission, one made all the more dangerous by the fact that there were five defectors (more than the usual defection) and by the fact that there were young children and an elderly grandmother involved. Ultimately, more than 50 brokers were involved in the family's escape across multiple countries.

What was it like getting to know the Rohs as they were running for their lives?

In most cases, by the time someone like me would meet a defector, the defector would have made it to South Korea – or another country – and entered a facility that introduced them things like how to use an ATM, the concept of democracy etc. They would have begun the process of adjusting to the world outside North Korea. So, it was highly unusual to meet defectors so soon after they had fled their country. Because of this, we experienced what these people are taught in a way perhaps never seen before. North Koreans are told from a very young age that Americans want to harm them – want to kill them in fact. A lot of the North Korean identity is actually based on this fear of and demonization of Americans. When I met Grandma, I could palpably feel her struggle as she grappled with the experiences she was having with us vis a vis what she had been told for the last 80+ years. On the one hand, the affection between us was growing and, on the other, she wondered if we might actually try to kill her. Little by little as the journey unfolded, she began to realize just how much the regime had distorted things and the resulting psychological abuse she had suffered. Seeing someone at her age, a person who loved her country so deeply, move beyond what she had always known, was very powerful and emotional.

Another strand follows the story of a mother in South Korea trying to rescue her teenage son. How did you meet Soyeon?

Like the Rohs, we met Soyeon through Pastor Kim and we have grown very close in spite of our different languages and cultures.

It's important to note that the Roh family was not a typical defection story. Most defectors do not come out of the country as a family of five. Soyeon's story is more typical: a parent who crosses into China with the hope of making money and the intention of bringing children or other family members out after them. While the Roh family had a happy ending – made the more so by them all being together – Soyeon was not so lucky. Over the course of our filming Soyeon's search for her son (up until our last shoot with her just a few months ago) the news grew more and more devastating. There are no adequate words to express the suffering Soyeon has been through and continues to go through.

How did you obtain the footage in China if you weren't allowed to set foot in the country?

China is closely allied with North Korea and there is no way that we as filmmakers could shoot there without putting the family at risk. Pastor Kim can't travel to China either because he has been known by the regime for decades and fears the possibility of the Chinese government helping to kidnap him. However, his network of brokers and farmers along the border of China and North Korea were able to help the defectors and to shoot footage along the way. Hyukchang, a relative of the Roh family who had defected two years before, wanted to help his elderly mother and therefore met up with his family once they got further south in China. He contributed additional footage of the Chinese leg of the journey.

What about the Vietnam and Laos segments of the journey?

We were able to follow Pastor Kim to Vietnam and to film in both Vietnam and Laos. The exception was when the family attempts to cross the border into Laos through the jungle. For safety reasons, Pastor Kim wanted the crew to be entirely Asian for that piece of the journey, so our DP, Hyunseok Kim and our sound recordist, Daewon Choi, were the only crew members allowed in the jungle. My producer Rachel Cohen and I met up with them again on the Laos side of the border.

How did you obtain the hidden camera footage of life inside North Korea?

While I was doing initial research and figuring out what this movie could be, I discovered a lot of hidden camera footage on the internet, much of which came from a man named Jiro in Japan whose network began smuggling cameras into North Korea around the time of the famine in the 1990s. I used some of his footage in the movie. Pastor Kim's network also smuggles cameras into the country, and, interestingly, I discovered this footage before I even met Pastor Kim. Most of the hidden camera footage in the film comes from his network. This footage is shot by incredibly courageous North Koreans who risk their lives in an effort to expose the reality of their country to the outside world.

Discuss your approach to depicting North Korea in the movie

For the most part, what we see of North Korea is exactly what the Kim regime wants us to see: the nuclear missiles, the grand parades and the emotional deification of the Kims. It's nuts when you think about that. It was important to me to not only go past all of that but to go further, to remind the outside world that there are 26 million human beings living under that regime and that they have desires, fears and points of view like the rest of us and that we should acknowledge and care about that. In one part of the film, Hyeonseo says that people ask her why the North Koreans don't try to overthrow the regime. She explains that to a large extent the people of North Korea are so cut off that they can't imagine that another life exists outside of the one they have.

She goes further and says that she believes that any of us, if living as they North Koreans are, would be the same. And I agree.

Your work up to this point has mostly been in the editing room — how did this project improve your editing skills, if at all?

This has been the most challenging film I've worked on. The access I was given and the way in which the film evolved, meant that in the end I was left with an abundance of potent, incredible footage, and enough story to make a double feature or limited series. Along the way, I cut at least two very distinct films and also experimented with cutting episodes of a potential series. Ultimately when we decided to present this as one feature film right now, I had to let go of a lot of story, including essentially all of Hyeonseo's story, something that was difficult to do. Imagining the film in so many different ways and actually putting the film together in so many different ways was a great mental exercise. I'm not sure it's that different than mental exercises I've had with some other films but I can say that one of the most important relationships in filmmaking is the relationship between director and editor. There is a push/pull in the editing room that propels a film forward. The editor might think a scene is fine and the director might believe it can go further; or the editor might think that the entire second act should be flipped on its head etc etc. I played both roles in an earlier feature I directed called CITY OF JOY and here again, I was up against myself, and only myself. I was always at risk of fooling myself into thinking something had been nailed when it had not or not seeing something that another person might have seen etc. Trying to ensure that I didn't fall into those traps was a real challenge.

How long did it take to shoot this movie?

I filmed with Hyeonseo in New York and Seoul in 2018 and 2019. The movie centered on her until the fall of 2019 when we started following Soyeon and the Roh family. We were in South Korea when the border shut down between North Korea and China during the pandemic and eventually began to shoot remotely with Soyeon on skype really up until a couple of months ago. Because there were long periods when we were waiting for information out of North Korea (something that can take months and months) I worked on other projects throughout this period as well. This included editing work on a few films as well as shooting on another documentary that I'm directing but that that shoots closer to home, in New York.

Which cameras did you use in this movie?

The brokers and farmers used iPhones and flip-phone cameras but when we were filming in South Korea, Vietnam and Laos we used the Sony A73S and the Sony FS7. In the jungle scenes we shot with a sturdier camcorder and in South Korea we shot some more stylized parts with the Panasonic Lumix.

ABOUT THE TEAM

MADELEINE GAVIN - DIRECTOR AND EDITOR

Madeleine Gavin has edited award-winning narrative and documentary films that have premiered at Sundance, Toronto, Berlinale, and Cannes, among others. Madeleine directed and edited the Netflix Original Documentary, *City of Joy*, centered around a revolutionary center in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. She is in production on a film that follows an indomitable group of octogenarians in New York City who, while facing debilitating illnesses, are finding transcendence through their relationship with an irascible, larger-than-life music coach. Madeleine is a member of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

JANA EDELBAUM - PRODUCER

Jana Edelbaum is an Emmy Award winning producer and founder of Ideal Partners, a television and film production company in NYC. Previous productions include documentaries *House of Z* for Netflix, *Waiting for Hockney* for Channel 4 and Sundance, and narrative films *Strange Weather*, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival and Netflix, *The Inevitable Defeat of Mister & Pete*, released by Lionsgate before being nominated for an Independent Spirit Award and Humanitas Award, *Idina Menzel: Which Way To The Stage* for Disney+, among numerous others. Select current projects include *The Librarians* directed by Kim Snyder, a biopic about iconic choreographer Alvin Ailey written and directed by Barry Jenkins with Fox Searchlight, and TV series *Nestora* in development with Blumhouse and AMC Studios.

RACHEL COHEN - PRODUCER

Rachel Cohen is an independent film producer based in New York and, since 2007, head of production at Ideal Partners. Current projects include: a feature film biopic about iconic choreographer, *Alvin Ailey*, directed by Barry Jenkins and distributed by Searchlight; *The Librarians*, a feature documentary about the destructive book banning in Texas, directed by Kim Snyder; a drama series based on a New Yorker article in development with AMC and produced with Blumhouse TV; a comedy series inspired by the life of fashion designer, Peter Som. Previous projects include *House of Z*; *Strange Weather*; *The Inevitable Defeat of Mister & Pete*; *Dirty Girl*. Prior to Ideal, Rachel was SVP of Development and Production at Tribeca Productions, and before that she spent seven years at Artisan Entertainment as SVP Development and Acquisitions where she spearheaded the acquisition of *The Blair Witch Project*.

SUE MI TERRY - PRODUCER

Dr. Sue Mi Terry is one of the world's leading experts on the Korean Peninsula and East Asia, with extensive experience in intelligence, policymaking, academia, and think tanks. She has served as a Senior Analyst at the CIA, Director of Korea, Japan and Oceanic Affairs at the National Security Council under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for East Asia at the National Intelligence Council, and National Intelligence Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Since leaving the government, Dr. Terry has been the Director of the Asia program and the Hyundai Motor-Korea Foundation Center for Korean History and Public

Policy at the Wilson Center, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and senior research scholar at Columbia University. She is a regular guest on television, radio and podcasts, and a former MSNBC commentator.

CREDITS

An Ideal Partners Production

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Sue Mi Terry
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Gwang Il Jung
Jean Lee
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Sunok Park
Jinhae Roh
Jinpyeong Roh
Yonggil Roh
Yeongbok Woo
Esther Park
Hyukchang Wu
Yeonghee Woo
Cheongmi Woo
**And more than 50 anonymous individuals and brokers in North
Korea, China, Vietnam, Laos and South Korea**

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