

“North Korea's First Dissidents?”

Donald Macintyre

A 2006-2007 Pantech Fellow at Shorenstein APARC, Donald Macintyre has been researching a book on how life in North Korea is changing at the grassroots level and what these changes mean for the international community's approach toward Pyongyang. Macintyre was *Time Magazine's* Seoul bureau chief from 2001-2006, covering general news, politics and culture in North and South Korea. He has traveled to North Korea six times and made numerous trips to China's border with North Korea to interview defectors, refugees and traders.

Macintyre will discuss how a Japanese journalist and a North Korean defector recently started publishing a remarkable magazine called *Rimjin-gang*. North Koreans reporting from inside North Korea write most stories in the magazine. These underground reporters record video and take photographs and then smuggle them across the border into China before returning to their homes in North Korea. The North Korean defector edits the Korean-language edition of the magazine in Seoul. The Japanese journalist edits a Japanese edition in Osaka, and an English edition is in the works.

Few reporters anywhere in the world take greater risks than the staff of *Rimjin-gang*. If caught, these reporters would face harsh prison sentences, at a minimum. The reporters say they are doing this because they want the outside world to know what is really going on inside North Korea. One of them told the BBC, “Some people in North Korea may say I’m a traitor, but I’m confident in what I’m doing, standing alone for democracy.”

Are the *Rimjin-gang* reporters North Korea’s first dissidents? The North Koreans who report for *Rimjin-gang* are consciously opposed to the policies of the North Korean regime, although they are not necessarily interested in overthrowing it. But in North Korea, the simple act of reporting the truth threatens the edifice of official lies underpinning the regime.

Macintyre believes that the story of dissent in North Korea is unlikely to unfold the way it did in the Eastern Bloc due to significant differences in the economic, political and historical contexts. But dramatic changes are occurring throughout North Korean society amid the spread of markets and information about the outside world. Apathy and anger are replacing awe of the regime as more and more North Koreans “dissent” from official policy in their daily lives.

Macintyre will discuss how Washington and the rest of the world should respond to *Rimjin-gang*, a North Korean initiative coming not from Pyongyang but—for the first time—from “civil society.”

About Donald Macintyre: <http://aparc.stanford.edu/people/donaldmacintyre/>