

## Rob Montz Discusses 'Juche Strong,' North Korean Documentary, Dousing Clams In Gasoline

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WASHINGTON -- Why don't more North Koreans leave when they have the opportunity? And why do people in the United States know so little about this country?

Local filmmaker Rob Montz has just released the trailer for his new documentary "[Juche Strong](#)," which examines North Korea's pervasive and remarkably effective nationalist ideology. And soccer. (See the trailer above.)

The film seeks to shed light on a country that's best known in the United States through ([Emmy-nominated](#)) caricature. Montz -- a libertarian whose political outlook helps shape the documentary -- brings in the perspectives of policy experts and a North Korean refugee living in Maryland, along with scenes he surreptitiously filmed while traveling to North Korea earlier this year.

The Huffington Post caught up with Montz recently to find out more about his film and what he saw, heard, ate and learned during his travels to Pyongyang.

**The Huffington Post:** "*Juche Strong*" -- what is it?

**Rob Montz:** "Juche Strong" is a documentary film about North Korea's 2010 World Cup. That year was the first time the country had competed in the games in over 40 years. And the last time NK was at the World Cup they actually beat Italy in what is generally considered one of the biggest upsets in the games' history.

So the film tells their story -- what happened to them on the field, their playing style, etc. And it interlaces and related the Cup matches with a broader examination of the country's propaganda apparatus.

**HuffPost:** *I understand you have libertarian inclinations. Do you think that influences your interest in North Korea, or your take on that country?*

**Montz:** Yeah my first job post-college was an internship at the Cato Institute -- basically a six-month boot camp in libertarian philosophy where you can spend large parts of the workday debating the finer points of "[The Fountainhead](#)."

And I'm a fellow at the [Moving Picture Institute](#), which is a freedom-oriented film group that helps finance up and coming filmmakers

So for me, the ideal society gives people lots of freedom to pursue their own happiness and use their own talents in whatever way they choose. But if you look around it seems like a large slice of humanity is all too willing to stop out individualism as long as you convince them its part of some great good -- if you tell them a good story. And that -- I think -- is a very very prominent fact about North Korea society. That yes, absolutely there is "hard" tyranny there -- secret police, labor camps, etc. But at least as crucial to the country persisting and avoid collapse is the "soft" tyranny of ideology -- of using well craft propaganda to convince most of society that they're vital parts of a great story.

But of course, importantly, I don't think North Korea is the only country that has a leadership the exploits the power of narrative and myth (and religion) to stomp out individual thought and cultivate social solidarity. Those exact same forces are at play here in the U.S. -- in a much more moderated form of course.

**HuffPost:** *Did you find much of a North Korean community in the D.C. area as you were shooting your film?*

**Montz:** I was able to find and film an actual North Korean refugee who lives in Maryland. She's featured prominently in the film.

As far as the policy community, yes there's definitely a robust one here and everyone knows everybody else.

**HuffPost:** *You actually went to North Korea. Was there anything unexpected you found there? Did your thesis hold up once you actually saw the country?*

**Montz:** I did. I went in June. I was in the country for I think eight days, staying mostly in Pyongyang, plus a trip to Kaesong and a couple other nearish cities.

I definitely don't want to overstate the power of my impressions. You can't just talk to a North Korean on the street. You can't walk out of your hotel. Generally you only see what they want you to see. So I'm operating from a limited perspective.

That being said, the chief thing I took away -- which I guess not-coincidentally strongly support the thesis of my film --is that North Koreans are actually really normal. In the press they're either painted as slaves or automatons. But if you go there and you sit down to eat and you have some soju (their kind of terrible vodka) and talk with your handler and their friends, they aren't just robotically spouting praise for the dear leader. They're talking about exactly what I talk about with my friends -- family, work, sports, sex.

And that's an important point to make. Because in the parts of their world view

that are definitely strange to us -- Kim Il Sungism, *juche*, really really strong xenophobia, etc. That world view was implanted in them in precisely the same way really pernicious world views get implanted in Americans by their political leaders. By exploiting natural human tendencies for the religious and the collective and the yearning to be part of an exclusive group and the love of having an enemy and the feeling of being part of a transcendent story.

**HuffPost:** *What is *juche*, exactly, and did you really talk about sex with your North Korean handler? What did he have to say?*

**Montz:** *Juche* is the chief philosophy of the country -- typically it's translated as self reliance. This is a country that had been under brutal Japanese colonial rule for a couple decades before independence. And *juche* plays off the idea that in the country's recent past they were functionaries of an imperialist oppressor. *Juche* is a break from all that -- it's the idea that Koreans can be autonomous and self-supporting. It's also the idea of this all-pervasive spirit of national pride.

Re: Sex talk. I have to say that the chief unguarded alcohol drench time I had with some handlers was [when] we took part in what's apparently a new North Korean culinary tradition where you -- literally -- stack like 100 clams next to each other on the ground, douse them with gasoline, light them on fire and then eat them from their shells and wash them down with beer and soju.

My chief sources of calories for the evening were vodka and gasoline. So my memory is hazy, but we definitely did at least some brazen physical evaluations of some of the women we'd seen over the course of the trip. But the idea is these guys are much more normal than you'd think.

**HuffPost:** *The "Juche Strong" trailer touches on the question of why people don't leave North Korea, aside from because there are armed guards stopping them. A couple of years into thinking about this, can you now say why they don't leave (outside of the guns)?*

**Montz:** I don't want to overstate my case here. Everyone is operating with a severely limited data set when talking about this country.

However, having been there, having heavily researched the country and having talked to a number of top-notch North Korean academics (all of whom are also in the film), I can say that one of the reasons they're not leaving is that through a very smart and deliberate and specifically designed propaganda campaign the ruling regime has convinced a large part of the population that they're part of a grand national project.

And that project is in the most basic terms the protection of the "true Korea" against polluting western imperialist forces (namely, America), the sad/important point being this is a country that has been on the brink of economic disaster for about two and a half decades. It's about the best example

there is as to why Stalinist collectivist economies are busted. They don't work. And in North Korea's case they've led to endemic malnutrition, a huge famine in the 90s and a situation today where something like [a third of all North Korean children a suffering from stunting](#).

However, not nearly as many people are leaving as you'd think given the situation. In other fascist countries the rate of refugees was much higher. And part of the reason people aren't leaving is that this propaganda about preserving the true Korea is intoxicating. It's purpose-providing. People will put up with incredible hardship if they think for the sake of a grander purpose.

If North Korea were just labor camps and a police state it wouldn't last. It would have collapsed a long time ago just like people had been predicting it would.

But again, that's not to discount the other elements at play that keep people from leaving -- threats of retaliation to their families, armed guards, the fact that this is their home and where all their friends are, etc.

But go [Google a picture of the \[Yalu River\] that separates China from North Korea](#). You can see exactly what North Koreans who want to leave have to cross if they want to escape. It's not a very deep river. It's not all that far across. And there are huge stretches of it that are effectively unguarded.

**HuffPost:** *You've released the trailer. When do you plan to release the movie?*

**Montz:** The film comes out this winter. I'm finishing the cut for the full film now. Will send it through the ego-deflating but ultimately wildly helpful core group of advisers I've collected. Then finalize the cut. I'll be running a crowdsourcing campaign of some sort shortly after that, chiefly to raise money for the World Cup footage rights, and then premiere in D.C., with plans to do a couple more screenings out in California shortly thereafter.

**HuffPost:** *Is there anywhere in the D.C. area where people can get the clams-and-gasoline special you experienced in North Korea?*

**Montz:** Criminally, no -- not to my knowledge. The native North Korean woman I interview in my film actually used to run a restaurant out in the boonies in Virginia. I went there about a year ago but it's since closed.

I don't think native North Korea food is ever going to be a major money maker. They big dish in the country is this cold noodle soup that's profoundly flavorless.