
Living with Absences: A Foreigner's Sojourn in P'yongyang

Hazel Smith

International images of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are shaped by the limited coverage that international television crews have had of the country. By the nature of the medium, this tends to be either catastrophic pictures of suffering or, at the other extreme, visions of huge and orchestrated street or stadium events designed to show foreign visitors the more formal side of DPRK life. Other images trickle into western discourse from delegations that have visited the DPRK for a few days, or maybe even a week or two, whose personal experiences are invariably and inevitably negative because of the counterproductive restrictions that the Koreans insist on placing on short-term visitors' freedom of movement. These negative images are further reinforced by the often very strong and belligerent language that comes from official DPRK broadcasting and press outlets, language that would probably benefit substantially from a translator conversant with modern idiomatic English.

How North Korea is seen by the outside world is important because the dominant images tend to reinforce a picture of alien, strange beings who do not quite behave the same way as human beings elsewhere. This means that North Koreans can be demonized. At worst this perception allows the sometimes unspoken idea that it would not matter so much if there was military action against the country because somehow North Koreans are not quite human beings; at best it ignores the fact that North Koreans have the same basic needs and desires as everyone else in the world – food, health, safety and the ability to lead a decent life. It is also a denial of

how much change has taken place in the last decade in North Korea. This change has been more economic and social than political, but it has been substantial and is mostly irreversible.

Many educated North Koreans are fully aware of the images that foreigners have of them. Nowhere is this more displayed to them than when overseas visitors attempt to take photos of Koreans – usually children, but also adults. Koreans have told me they feel that foreigners only want negative images – a sick child rather than a child participating in a gymnastics display, or oxen pulling a harvester rather than a tractor that might be nearby. North Koreans do not want to feel as if they are living in a zoo – or worse, an exhibition of curiosities where visitors come to gawk and gape and to take the necessary photographic souvenir home to “normality.” Of course the government is preternaturally suspicious of foreigners finding out information it does not fully control, but such feelings do help to explain why Koreans go along with this policy. It is partly fear of repercussions, but it is also because of a widespread sense of national dignity.

Despite all these images, ordinary life does go on in the DPRK. And of course, as in every country in the world, there are different sorts of “ordinariness.” If you are Korean and live in a remote area with little food, when the harvest has run out in December or thereabouts your whole life will be shaped by the struggle to obtain food for yourself and your family. If you are a resident of the capital city, P'yongyang, and are lucky enough to have a job where you come into contact with foreigners, you probably have some access to hard currency that you

can then use to buy food and other goods. There are two overlapping economies in the DPRK – the food economy and the hard currency economy. Families living on productive cooperative farms are the only people – short of the small P’yongyang based elite that has access to hard currency – that have guarantees to food all the year round. Everyone else only has secure access to food if they can obtain hard currency and there is food in the system available to buy. Some are fortunate – dockers and restaurant workers in Ch’ongjin and Namp’o, for instance, who regularly come into contact with foreigners – or those engaged in trade on the China border. Most are not so fortunate; daily life is literally a battle for survival and adequate food supplies for survival are never guaranteed.

If you are one of the few foreigners living in the DPRK, then your ordinary life is very different from that of your Korean colleagues and friends – but it is nevertheless pretty mundane. A major benefit though is that the experience of living in the DPRK does allow for a more realistic understanding of some aspects of DPRK society than that brought via the five day delegation visits – visits which seem to inform foreign pundits’ analyses of DPRK realities.

Explaining what it is like to live in the DPRK sometimes seems only possible in a dialogue with someone else who has lived there. It is like nowhere else on earth, but it is hard to explain why. The DPRK is full of absences as much as presences, and it is only when you are resident, as opposed to passing through, that you come to appreciate the full extent of the absences. The absences make for stress not because of the threat of physical violence or harm. The DPRK is a very safe place to live. There are hardly any guns visible, and the population does not have an anti-foreigner mentality as in some other places in the world. The stress comes from everything not quite being as it seems. This is, for instance, a country that has the appearance of modernity – but with little correspondence to any

poor or rich contemporary society anywhere else in the world. A country with people who are supremely hospitable but who you can never quite get to know, or rather, who are never allowed to move beyond unstated but mutually well-understood barriers. It is not for nothing the DPRK is known among its foreign residents – in affectionate as well as exasperated terms – as the “parallel universe.”

The majority of residents are Chinese and Russian – maybe two to three hundred of them. Many are diplomats, and some of the Chinese are businessmen. There is a small diplomatic community, although many embassies are now closing down, like the Yemeni embassy, or cutting their numbers, like the Mongolian mission. In spite of the rapid opening of diplomatic relations with such countries as Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and especially the West European States after the 2000 North-South Korea Summit (13 of the 15 European Union member states now have diplomatic relations with the DPRK), there has been no significant increase in the number of foreign residents. Most countries choose to service their DPRK outpost from Beijing or even Seoul. There are a very small number of foreign students in residence – often with parents in the diplomatic community – including Mongolians studying medicine, Chinese studying Korean and Vietnamese and Cubans studying computing.

The foreigners who probably have made the biggest splash are the most recent arrivals – the humanitarian workers. These foreigners started arriving after 1995 when the DPRK’s chronic food problems were transformed into an acute food crisis. In response, the government appealed to the international humanitarian agencies for emergency help, which still continues because the need remains as the country cannot grow enough food to feed its population and does not have sufficient dollar earnings from exports to purchase food from abroad.

As of 2002 the resident humanitarian commu-

nity stands at about 100 people, including spouses and children, who come from all over the world: the United States and Afghanistan, Scandinavia and Bangladesh, Nepal and Italy, Australia and Bhutan, China and Canada, Cuba and Germany, to name but a few. Many UN international officers were originally employed as national officers in their home countries – places where UN humanitarian agencies were already operating like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Bangladesh and Burundi. These officers have already seen more than their fair share of distress. Many of the international officers also have worked in the most difficult parts of the world at the most difficult times. Only the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) tend to have younger, less-experienced workers – many of the best of them, for very understandable reasons, in transit towards more secure careers in the multilateral governmental organizations.

Because of the nature of the country, Koreans are not permitted to mix freely or socially with foreigners. Thus the tiny foreign community is close-knit and, because of the absence of many social outlets in the country, has to make its non-work life from within its own resources. There are no movie theatres that foreigners can go to, no theaters or clubs, no bars except in the few hotels that are open to foreigners, no places where non-DPRK books, newspapers, videos, cds, dvds, tapes, art or anything of entertainment value can be bought within the country. Neither is there a parallel or illegal market where any of these things can be obtained. Chinese residents who can pass themselves off as Koreans can sometimes buy in local markets, but a six foot plus blond Scandinavian speaking English (for example) is not able to get away with this. If basic goods are not bought in the few local shops with anything to purchase, or brought in from China, or swapped within the foreign community, they are simply not available. These are some of the absences I referred

to earlier. But another, much more important absence, both for Koreans and as well as for foreigners, is the lack of regular interaction between DPRK culture and other cultures of the world.

DPRK culture and the country's development of a specifically *Korean* culture is hardly known outside the DPRK, except for a few specialist researchers. Equally, North Koreans studying at university will have access to books, films, music and possibly art from other cultures, but most Koreans in school outside the major cities will not. The DPRK is now a poor country and does not have the resources to buy foreign cultural artifacts, but the main problem is the lack of regular communication with the outside that could develop a healthy and dynamic interrelationship between DPRK and other cultures. Cultural interchange, other than pre-arranged and non-spontaneous cultural "exchange," is a major and often unnoticed casualty of the inter-Korean conflict.

Political sensitivities make it very difficult for resident foreigners to have access to local Korean culture in a spontaneous fashion by attending local movie theaters, for instance, and there are minimal international cultural resources available. Perhaps the only regular entertainment "spot" is the RAC (the Random Access Club – an ironic name because humanitarian agencies do not have random access to beneficiaries) at the UN World Food Programme building. "Friday nights at the RAC" are now folkloric, featuring a lot of talking, some drinking and very often some dancing. Visiting foreigners are normally invited and, although the Koreans grumble at the inconvenience (transport must be provided to take the visitors back to their hotels late at night), most try to find a way to drop by. One tradition that has arisen since the RAC's opening in April 1998 is that all visiting delegations must put \$100 behind the bar and, no matter how senior or how sober, dance on that same bar. (Currently some very incriminating

photographs of some very important people are in the hands of some very discreet people.)

Given the many ordinary things that the foreign residents cannot do – visit Korean friends in their homes for instance – it becomes very important to maximize the value of what one can do. Mobility is as important for its psychological support, in the sense of being able to take at least some decisions about one's own life, as it is about being able to get from A to B. Bicycles are OK for the Spring and Autumn. P'yongyang is more or less flat and often very beautiful, especially along the banks of the Taedong River. In the Spring and Autumn it is also common for foreigners and locals to walk the long footpath by the river. Men and children fish, and very often students and schoolchildren take their books to the riverside to study. Small children play on the grassy banks by the river and are sometimes engaged in more serious activities, such as looking for herbs and edible grasses to supplement their diets.

Bicycling, or walking for that matter, is not a good option in the extremes of winter and summer temperatures, so it is absolutely necessary to drive. Foreigners need to drive for work and social purposes and many have their own vehicles. Of course, to drive in the DPRK a foreigner must take and pass the DPRK driving test.

The only prerequisite for taking the test is to have a driving license from your country of origin and to pay the fee. It is not necessary to speak the language, as an interpreter will come with you. When I took my test, my interpreter, who was a friend I had worked with for several months, was good enough to rather freely and beneficially (for me) translate correct answers to the questions asked by the examiner. The hard part, however, came in the practical examination. Just like in the UK, the test consists of driving the vehicle with a concentration on safety, and maneuvers, including a three-point turn, parking and reversing. For

me, all went more or less well until it came to the latter part – when I had to reverse an enormous UN land cruiser up a narrow and steep hill on a curve with masses of people walking behind and in front of the vehicle, none of whom seemed to know that it might be safer to keep out of my way. I eventually passed, but not until after a very fraught (again for me) discussion with the examiner. The discussion reminded me very much of the time in California when I had been pulled over by a traffic cop and was trying very hard to be charming, “British” and hopefully nonthreatening enough to prevent being landed with a ticket. (That worked too!)

Driving can be hazardous in the DPRK. Regular electricity cuts mean that street lights often are not working. Spare parts shortages also mean that many vehicles and bicycles do not have operating lights at night. The city's population is only just coming to terms with the recent experience (since the late-1990s) of streets crowded with vehicular traffic. People have yet to make up their minds about how to handle road safety. Some pedestrians seem to make a dash for it – into the path of approaching automobiles. This can be pretty disconcerting at night. Another problem is drunk driving. As far as can be seen, particularly on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, it is viewed as perfectly acceptable to have a few drinks and drive a vehicle.

Sunday afternoon is the time for partying – not the evening as everyone has to get up for work or school early the next day. Young men and women sit on the grass in groups, drink beer and sing. It is very common for passing foreigners to be physically dragged into the festivities and expected to sing a song (especially late in the afternoon when the beer is drunk and the party is becoming more exuberant) before being allowed to move on. If you cannot or will not sing, the only thing to do is to avoid the partying groups – refusing to sing is seen as just downright rude.

It is simply inconceivable in DPRK culture that anyone would feel inhibited at the thought of singing a song in public festivities or even on more formal occasions. Some of the most memorable events held in the DPRK are when staff from each agency or embassy (Koreans and foreigners) have collectively sung both DPRK and international songs as their contributions to “friendship” gatherings. There is inevitably an air of competition that creeps into these events, with many agencies practicing after work for weeks before the event, as it is all the while being hinted (by Koreans in “rival” agencies) that a particular local staff member has been hired, not so much because of an ability to work the computers or provide good interpretation skills, but more because the individual can play a nice piano accompaniment.

Nevertheless, there is something both touching and, perhaps, hopeful about the sight of sometimes very distinguished, as well as more lowly, DPRK and international staff (with the foreigners usually out of tune) jointly rendering “Pan-gap-sum-ni-ta,” “nice to meet you,” a very popular DPRK melody. Perhaps even more moving is to hear the same group follow this up with a full-throated account of Michael Jackson’s “Heal the World.” The chorus, by the way, is pretty apt – “there are people dying, if you care enough for the living – build a better life for you and for me.” (I have this on video.)

These semi-social diplomatic occasions provide one means of developing relationships between foreign workers and Korean counterparts. But the most substantial personal relations develop, as in many countries, at work. International humanitarian workers often travel outside P’yongyang – always with a Korean who speaks English – and these trips, sometimes lasting two or three weeks and involving many hours in a land cruiser, allow for a certain amount of intimacy, especially if the team has worked together over a period of months or years. Conversations revolve around families, the Korean

counterpart’s university education and – because BBC World Service is normally the station of choice on the car radio – international politics. Some also seek ways to improve English language skills. Many Korean national officers, however, speak a number of languages, including English, very well – despite in almost all cases never having lived in an English-speaking country. North Korean English-language speakers have a British accent – very rarely with an American overlay. This is despite the fact that English is taught in the universities with the help of Hollywood films – *Kramer versus Kramer*, for example, being a current teaching tool in the Foreign Languages University. Some foreigners study Korean, taught by an extremely good teacher at the Korean International School, but very few keep it up as their studies are often interrupted by field visits outside P’yongyang and intermittent trips outside the country.

The sadness is that strong friendships between Koreans and foreigners are almost precluded. Under the current system, the Korean staff is accountable first and foremost to the government, not to the humanitarian agency that pays their wages, and they must report back on their work, including their relationships with foreigners. Neither is it possible for a foreigner to meet the family of a Korean member of staff because it is not permitted for Koreans to have such a level of social interaction with foreigners. When friendships grow, as they sometimes do, it is difficult (but not impossible) to consolidate trust.

In a place where there are so many sensitivities inhibiting personal behaviour, making for caution even in day-to-day speech and social intercourse, shopping provides a bit of an outlet. Food can be bought in a few shops – all of which are also used by Koreans if they have access to dollars. Particularly popular is the “Argentine shop,” also known as the “Blue shop” (named for the color of its walls), which was opened in 1999 and is run by a Swiss/Argentine

with links to the ruling party. It is the only place in the county where shampoo and toothpaste can be bought. Previously, foreigners brought most toiletries from China or home. The store also provides an odd mix of food and drink (sometimes including very good Californian red wine), basic household goods (on the ground floor) and furniture (upstairs). Rumor has it that the reason the stock waxes and wanes on the shelves is that the owner refuses to restock the shop until his Korean partners pay him what they owe him for each batch of goods. Since this can be a difficult and drawn-out process, it seems a logical reason for sometimes half-empty shelves.

Sometimes both women and men can pretend P'yongyang is Hong Kong (a very long stretch of the imagination, and this statement is meant to be a gentle joke) and have clothes made from material bought in China or the DPRK. The problem is not that Korean tailors and seamstresses are not good (they are) but that buttons, zippers, thread, snaps and needles can hardly be found in the country. Pattern books are left over from the 1960s, so if what is wanted is a nice mini-dress made up à la Mary Quant, hot-pants (remember them?) or a polka dotted flared skirt, as long as you bring in the material, you are fine.

Some foreigners take part in sport. The city has an Olympic size swimming pool, which is open once a week on Saturday mornings for foreigners. It is clean but unheated so it is only usable from Spring through to early Fall. Some play golf on the very glitzy golf course along the P'yongyang-Namp'o road (at \$100 an hour). A few others have taken up Tae Kwon Do, driving to a Korean sports center twice a week for instruction.

Foreign residents mostly survive when they are not working by reverting to the basics – if they are not out of P'yongyang working in some remote part of the country. Social life revolves around eating – in homes or at one of the half dozen or so restaurants

in town open for business. The “Japanese” restaurant, situated in a back alley opposite the main P'yongyang hotel, the Koryō, which is run by Koreans from Japan, is an option, as is the most popular establishment of the moment, the “Macao Restaurant,” which is located in the basement of the Yanggak-do hotel. The Macao opened just a couple of years ago and is partly owned by Stanley Ho, owner of many casinos in Macao. All take only dollars in payment (sometimes Chinese Yuan or Japanese Yen – but hardly ever the British pound, as I have found out to my embarrassment), as do all Korean stores, hotels and eating places everywhere in the country.

The “dollarization” of the country is the most visible example of the economic change that has taken place since the mid-1990s. The North Korean currency, the Won (a different currency from the South Korean Won), has been replaced for all real monetary transactions by the U.S. dollar. This applies not just to individuals but also to government agencies and North Korean business. Another change, because of the breakdown of the public distribution system in the mid-1990s, which had previously granted a relatively equitable distribution of basic goods including food, is the move to a system where price is determined by supply and demand – the classic and basic premise of a market economy. These seem to be irreversible changes, although this marketization of the economy has not been accompanied by significant political liberalization. If a deal can be reached on the missile issue, there is some chance that the security mentality might ease in the country.

Apart from the RAC and the tiny number of restaurants, there are few public places where foreigners can go, and so most social life takes place at home. This is not as easy as it sounds as nearly everyone works from 8:00 or 8:30AM through to at least 6:00PM, but most people make an effort, even on weekdays. Basic food can be bought in the coun-

try, but sometimes vegetables, bread and meat are brought from China. At dinner, apartments in the diplomatic compound become small havens of “normality” – where conversations can be open and a little frivolity allowed. Inevitably the discussion hardly ever veers away from work for too long. Although being on the inside does not necessarily afford a better view of the big picture in respect of the DPRK, it does make you realize that much of what we see written or broadcast on the outside is often distorted, if not downright nonsense and sometimes risible.

One “authoritative work on the DPRK” (the person who wrote it has never visited the country) states that most educated North Koreans have never heard of Shakespeare. It is true that Shakespeare cannot be bought in bookshops, but the works are available in P’yongyang’s main library and it is simply not true that educated Koreans have not heard of the bard. Far from it. It just so happens that a Korean friend who I have now known for twelve years teaches Shakespeare, in English, at Kim Il Sung University as part of the course on English Literature. A more mundane “fact” from the same book asserts that romantic couples are never seen together without being part of a larger group. It is true, of course, that public displays of affection between Korean men and women are not ostentatious, but anyone walking by the banks of the Pot’onggang (another major river in P’yongyang) in the evening would soon be disabused of that particular statement through simple observation of the couples sitting on the benches.

This does not mean to say that the DPRK is an easy place to live – for Koreans or for foreigners. The health services are precarious, although Korean health workers do their best. I have had the best of treatment within their capacities whenever I have had to visit the hospitals – and at no charge. Still, it is prudent to seek medical care outside the country for any serious health problem. Since there are only

two flights a week in and out of the country in the winter – on Tuesday and Saturday to and from Beijing, it is not a place to get sick in on a Tuesday or Saturday afternoon. For international humanitarian field-workers working outside the capital, life is very tough – not just because of the lack, sometimes absence, of electricity, heat, running water and sewage facilities, but also because of the isolation. Humanitarian workers are not permitted outside their hotels in Hayasan, Haeju, Wonsan, Ch’ongjin, Sinuiju or any other places where they are monitoring and evaluating assistance. Their Korean counterparts often leave them after the completion of visits in the afternoon and on weekends (usually the Korean guides eat separately in the evening and the humanitarian worker can be the only person in a dark, cold and miserable dining room designed for up to a couple of hundred people). Unless another international worker accompanies them – and normally this is not the case – they have no one to talk to for days and weeks on end. This is truly when an individual’s psychological resources are tested.

The upside of this intensely challenging environment for resident foreigners is the equally intensely supportive community. This does not mean that everyone gets on with everyone else, but it does mean that newcomers very quickly recognize the value of a survival mechanism based around subsuming differences so that mutual support can be given on a day-to-day basis in this tiny, restricted community. Not all will cope – physical and emotional illnesses are inevitable consequences not just of the isolation but also of the country’s collapsed social infrastructure. This is not, in other words, a romantic environment. Everyone will suffer diarrhea for instance – and most will endure some form of burnout at some point.

However difficult it is for foreigners, though, the experience of living in the DPRK can never be as stark as that of many of the population who continue to face food shortages with little hope of sub-

stantial economic development or political change without a peace treaty on the peninsula. Most of the population of the DPRK continues to suffer from malnutrition and malnutrition-related disease and illness. Comparatively speaking, humanitarian workers are privileged persons. In the end they will be able to leave the conditions behind them. Few in the DPRK will be able to do so.

Hazel Smith is director of the M.A. program in international relations at the University of Warwick, UK. She has traveled widely throughout the DPRK over a period of 12 years and has worked in-country for United Nations agencies.