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North Korea - Yesterday and Today

by Adrian Buzo

The immediate advantages of falsifying the past were obvious, but the ultimate motive was mysterious. He took up his pen again and wrote: I understand HOW: I do not understand WHY.

* George Orwell, 1984

From May to October 1975 I served at the Australian embassy at P’yongyang, north Korea. In fact, this period constituted the entire lifespan of Australian diplomatic representation in north Korea because in October 1975 the north Korean embassy in Canberra withdrew without warning from Canberra and six days later our entire mission was expelled from P’yongyang. This account is basically a first person description of what I saw and how I have since come to evaluate what I saw during those six months. It is based on a lecture I gave to an RAS meeting in Seoul, May 1981.¹

In December 1972 the Australian Labor Party gained office for the first time in 23 years and embarked on a mildly reformist foreign policy, especially with regard to the three socialist regimes in Asia - China, North Vietnam and north Korea. Diplomatic recognition was speedily negotiated with China and North Vietnam, and for the first time Australian diplomats were permitted to have ordinary social contact with their north Korean counterparts. A short period of sporadic contact was followed by a period of formal negotiations on diplomatic recognition, which was achieved in 1974. Soon afterwards both countries announced plans to establish resident embassies in each other’s capital.

I had majored in Japanese Studies at Sydney University and upon graduating in 1972 joined our Foreign Service. At my own request I was posted to Seoul as a language student, and although I did not consciously see this step as leading towards a future posting in the north the possibility was always there. As things turned out, my timing was perfect and after two years of studying and working in Seoul I was appointed as Second Secretary to P’yongyang. Thus it was that on the morning of 26 April 1975 I and a senior officer arrived by train in Peking on our way to open the Australian Embassy in P’yongyang.  [page 2]

It was to be an interesting morning. On arrival we learned that Kim Il-song was in Peking on a state visit and that he was to leave for P’yong-yang by special train in two hours’ time. We hurried to our hotel, showered, changed and returned to the station to watch the spectacle. By the time we got back to Peking Station the famous Chinese rent-a-crowd was assembling along with the entire diplomatic corps, Korean residents of Peking and cheer squads – the latter consisted of troupes of adolescent girls dressed in apricot or turquoise pyjamas running in place, waving pompoms and chanting slogans.

The din grew and grew until at last Kim made his entrance, followed by an entourage of senior Korean and Chinese ministers and officials. The Korean ministers seemed determined to appear as inconspicuous and obsequious as possible in Kim’s presence, and I remember being rather surprised later to find that some of them, like Foreign Minister Ho Tam and Foreign Trade Minister (now Deputy Premier) Kye Ung-t’ae, could project a strong personality in our talks with them. Kim Il-song himself appeared plump and sleek, a rather fixed toothy smile creasing his face, as he made his way up the platform in front of the cheer-squad and then down along the diplomatic line. He stepped firmly, his head lolling as if in modesty or shyness, the smile unchanging. As he shook hands with the assembled ambassadors, the famous little fluid-sac on the right side of his neck would bobble about and his interpreter would relay the stream of comments that passed from his lips.

When he reached our ambassador he was informed who the two extra bodies were, but no particular look of recognition crossed his face as he routinely shook our hands. A succession of damp, limp paws followed his as the rest of his entourage filed past silently.

Kim now reached the small group of Korean officials resident in Peking who were gathered around his special carriage, and scenes of earnest ecstasy ensued as he acknowledged their bawling cries of “Manse,” accepted a bouquet from a small girl –at which the mother too went into what could only be described as a frenzy—and then entered the train. In due course it began to pull out, pursued down the platform at a headlong sprint by enthusiastic young Korean men waving more bouquets.

Two days later, having been joined by an administrative Second Secretary, we made our own exit from Peking and began the 22-hour train ride to P’yongyang. The images of the industrial northeast of China are still vivid to me with mile upon mile of drab industrial development stretching on either side of the major train stations. The small scale brick- walled factories and streets almost bereft of motor vehicles have a very [page 3] strong atmosphere for many travellers in China, possibly because they remind us of an almost Dickensian past.

As the train moved on into Manchuria we left this belt behind us and in the early light of the following day were greeted with rugged, beautiful scenery, before this too gave way to the flat coastal plains around the mouth of the Yalu River. A lengthy stop at Antung on the Chinese side was followed by a short haul across the Yalu to Shinuiju on the Korean side, and we were at last in north Korea. The contrast is palpable. Political slogans now vied for space on the station buildings, and the heavy presence of north Korean army men in their jodhpurs, jack-boots and belted tunics announced that we were in another country.

After another lengthy stop we set off for the final two-hour run to P’yongyang along the western coastal plain. The scenery of Korea’s west coast is generally uninspiring with low, non-descript hills ambling off in all directions. To this general lack of distinction the early spring vegetation, still brown and stunted, added little. Here and there villages were strung along the bases of the low hills, their structures set with almost barrack-like regularity. Above them the hillside was usually adorned with huge white Korean characters spelling out slogans of praise or exhortation - “Long live the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-song” “Let’s win the speed battle,” “Forward at the speed of the 70-day battle “Thought, technology and culture all in accordance with the great Chuje idea,” and the like.

Finally we entered the suburbs of P’yongyang and pulled into P’yongyang Station, to be greeted by officials from the Protocol Depart-ment of the north Korean Foreign Ministry who duly introduced us to our interpreter, saw us to our hotel and withdrew after issuing us an invitation to the coming May Day celebrations. The six-month period of official Australian residence in P’yongyang had begun.

Physically, P’yongyang has much to recommend it - most planned cities do. After almost total destruction in the Korean War a new city has been built with wide, grid-patterned streets, abundant greenery and a generally harmonious skyline. P’yongyang originally grew up on a bend of the Taedong River and acquired a new town when the Japanese, as was their custom in Korea, sited the railway station well outside the old city walls. The city walls and most of the old city gates disappeared under the [page 4] Japanese and only the main east gate, the Taedong-mun, and the small west gate, the Podongmun, have survived.

The basic shape of pre-war P’yongyang is still vaguely recognizable but the distinction between the Japanese quarter around the station and the old, somewhat higgledy-piggledy Korean town inside the old walls has been lost. The city is now a uniform entity. In the center of the city massive-looking public buildings confront wide, often tree-lined boulevards while four- and five-story residential buildings sometimes stretch for entire city blocks. Throughout the city there is a preponderance of medium-rise apartment buildings, and it is only on the outskirts as well as here and there in little clumps that one finds ordinary houses.

The city plan is essentially Soviet Provincial, but it avoids the monotony of its many models by virtue of its beautiful setting on the banks of the Taedong. The river winds down from the northwest, curves almost due south around the wooded hill to the north of the old town known as Moranbong (Peony Peak), and then girds the eastern and southern boundaries of the city proper before swinging westward to the sea. The rock cliffs of Moranbong, the mid-stream wooded islets, the broad tree-lined quays and the undulating countryside all add up to a pleasant vista. The first sight of P’yang made a strong impression on many of the early European visitors; and to the modern traveller, who has usually passed through a rash of drab, run-down Chinese cities, the location as well as the European cast to the city plan and architecture often make a favorable impression.

In time, however, it is the details that arrest one and they are less than impressive. The uneven roads, the cracks and leaks in almost every building, the wheezing, decrepit trolley buses and the recurring sight of broken-down vehicles on the streets are all signs of a fundamental solidarity with socialist planning and execution around the globe. One feels mildly puzzled at the absence of bicycles and other such humble vehicles, but the most disturbing aspect of P’yongyang is that there is almost no street life.

On a typical street in P’yongyang one might find an occasional government shop, its wares stacked squarely on shelves as in a pantry – no street-stalls, hawkers or newspaper stands and very few pedestrians of any description. If there were groups of more than four or five they would usually be shuffling along in para-military formation on their way to or from some job of work. The children habitually marched to and from school in tiny bands, their arms swinging high as they rather breathlessly sang marching songs - all without an adult supervisor in sight. Very [page 5] rarely did one see two people stopped in conversation and never did one see any casual groupings. In the main department store the predominant sound is the shuffling of feet and the murmur of voices – normal or subdued, never exuberant or aggressive. I continually held out an ear for spontaneous laughter in public but was never rewarded.

Apart from public parks there seemed to be no focal points for social gatherings above the immediate neighborhood or work place level – no coffee houses, no small stores, no tabangs, no entry to hotels except on business, no ordinary restaurants, no market places, few cinemas and few large shops. As we were effectively screened off from the population I do not know in detail what the average Korean family does with whatever spare time it has, but as far as public expression of high spirits is concerned there is none.

The foreign community in P’yongyang into which we melted consisted mainly of diplomats, with a few students and contract workers for foreign companies. There were about thirty resident missions in P’yongyang in 1975, about half from the socialist bloc and the remainder mostly either Arab or Third World. Australia was the only “hard core” Western-allied country represented, with our nearest neighbors Sweden. Finland and Austria had small trade offices and France had an unofficial trade representative.

The diplomats lived mostly in a charmless little ghetto on the eastern outskirts of P’yongyang where a large number of chanceries had been built. The Chinese, the Soviets and a few Eastern Europeans had downtown compounds which predated the establishment of the diplomatic compound proper. Relations between missions were usually pleasant, which was just as well because we had virtually only each other for company. The quality of the diplomats naturally varied and much of what they said reflected ignorance, bias, prejudice or just home government policy; but beneath it all the insights they could offer into north Korean realities in the course of long, frequently alcoholic exchanges were fascinating, and for this reason more than any other I was sorry to see our mission closed.

Contacts with Koreans were extremely limited. Approaches to people in the street to ask directions (as a gambit) were met with monosyllabic answers and a swift departure. Shops outside the diplomatic compound refused to serve us, and we could eat only by appointment in two or three prestige restaurants where no ordinary Korean could venture. We could wander around the city at will, but guards would materialize out of nowhere if we unwittingly ventured too close to what seem to have been a number of special compounds and apartment buildings for high officials. [page 6] Ordinary citizens felt free to wave us away, sometimes aggressively, if we dallied or seemed to be taking too close an interest in this object or that. Other foreigners reported their cameras being seized and film exposed for apparently innocuous photographs. I was once almost set upon for stopping to read a workers’ notice board inside a building construction site. There is no question that north Koreans are instilled with suspicion and fear of outsiders, and their desire to avoid contact is both a desire to avoid retribution and a desire to meet the exacting demands of the Party for discipline and ideological purity.

This unfreiendliness often verges on paranoia in official circles, and it made our dealings with the Government almost uniformly unpleasant. Our slender telephone book had only two numbers in it for contact with the Government (all the other numbers were for embassies and foreign – socialist bloc –news agencies, etc.). These were the Office of Diplomatic Services for administrative matters and the Protocol Bureau through which we had to pass in order to make an appointment with anyone at all in the Government. In practice, only appointments with our area section chief were regularly approved, and these meetings were usually brief, formal and with no personal content at all. They usually consisted of hard-line repetitions of north Korean policy delivered patiently and at length as though it were only a matter of time before we came round to seeing it their way. In our final days in P’yongyang they simply refused to see us at all.

There was no such thing as friendly chit-chat, let alone social invitations. At official receptions one grew used to the sad spectacle of de facto segregation between foreign diplomats and local officials. I used to make a rule of plunging into the midst of the local scrum, usually crowding around the buffet table, but could only elicit conversation from one or two who seemed to be cleared to talk with foreigners. On most occasions they would simply ignore greetings and turn away without any pretense at manners. Conversation at banquets was equally non-existent. My neighbors either did not respond at all or else baulked at revealing even the most elementary information, such as the composition of their family or the countries to which they had been posted.

We were frequently reprimanded for this or that infraction of unstated rules of conduct for foreigners by the Ministry. An early famous incident occurred when a group of us took a ride on the P’yongyang Underground and a walk through a suburban housing area. Curious at a long queue of children outside an unmarked shop, I entered and observed a lady doling out milk ices behind a counter. We exchanged pleasantries [page 7] for a moment and she then came outside and very graciously gave us a tray full of them, whereupon we stood around eating them while one of our company snapped a couple of photos. The following day we were called into the Foreign Ministry and reprimanded for taking “un-authorized” photographs of “mud-stained” children that could be used as anti-north Korean propaganda abroad. I suppose, in retrospect, that we should have been happy to have elicited from them direct evidence of the careful doctoring north Korea’s image requires as a land of happy, healthy children; but at the time it was particularly annoying to have to endure this kind of lecturing.

As one goes up the bureaucratic ladder one finds sleeker, more relaxed officials in the chair opposite; the presentation is more relaxed and apparently more reasonable, but one searches in vain for any evidence to support this impression. As in Albania, the currents of international change eddy past the feet of the north Korean ruling class but it remains unmoved.

Apart from most ordinary areas of city, we could travel freely to and from the airport and also down the main road to Namp’o on the coast, 60 kilometers away. Three times a year diplomatic tours would be arranged – one each to Panmunjom, Paektu-san and Kumgang-san. If some special visitor came, then other tours to places such as Hamhung could be arranged, but all other travel was effectively prohibited. We began our stay with a series of travel requests somewhat innocently, in response to the invitation of the Ministry to travel widely because “seeing is believing.” The reality quickly emerged that either roads were out, trains or hotels full in the case of major centers, or else that it was too dangerous or uncomfortable in other areas. These excuses reached the level of farce when we were refused permission to travel to a petrochemical works 50 kms from Seoul upon the invitation of a group of British technicians working there, on the grounds that the road was impassible – this when our Finnish colleagues traveled it almost every week.

For our Mission, then, life was a steady round of eating, drinking, sleeping and working with little relief. There was never any substance to our bilateral relations, and thus very little real work to be done once we had settled in and made all our courtesy calls. What little work there was took a great deal of time and effort to accomplish as we grappled with an unhelpful hotel staff and government bureaucracy. Requests for more working space – we had been working four to a room, in a near-empty hotel were countered with one of many bland untruths; usually that the hotel would soon be full and they would need every room. It took a letter [page 8] from our Foreign Minister to his north Korean counterpart to obtain it after all other means had failed. Probably the nearest thing to flexibility I experienced in my time there was hearing our interpreter, after listening to our seething driver report the theft of our Mercedes’ windscreen wipers, suggest we pinch a pair from some other car.

Some of our best insights were gained on the trips we undertook to Panmunjom and Paektu-san. The Panmunjom trip was a three-day affair organized, as we later found out, so that it could be portrayed as a gesture of solidarity by diplomatic missions with the north Korean stand on reunification. The first day consisted of a slow drive in convoy to Kaesong, 200 kms away, plus a visit to a ginseng farm and a famous beauty spot, the Pakyon waterfall. From Kaesong one visits Panmunjom much as one would from Seoul, except that there is no general caution given on behavior in the Joint Security Area. Thus it was that on the morning of the second day of our trip the number plates were removed from our cars (presumably to frustrate possible US attempts to log the movements of visitors from the north side) and we drove across the flat plain that lies between Kaesong and Panmunjom. Our tour started with a stop at a rather strident photography exhibition mounted in the little schoolhouse where the armistice was actually signed. We then crossed the Bridge of No Return and entered the Panmun-gak,the north Korean reception building that straddles the hill overlooking the little conference huts in current use.

After a brief reception we all filed out onto the balcony to survey the scene to the south. Last out was the PLO Representative, who suddenly burst forth with a series of shouted slogans in Arabic which were translated into Korean in an equally raucous manner by his interpreter with the aid of prepared notes. As they had been the last to file out they now stood blocking the entrance and we all had no choice but to stand there for the duration. The reason for this was quite simple. Two days later we read in the Pyongyang newspapers that we foreign diplomats had visited Panmunjom and “unanimously” declared that the US should quit south Korea.

This sort of behavior came as no real surprise. The afternoon we then spent in Kaesong was rather more surprising, for our hosts managed to avoid showing us a single historical site in a city that was the capital during the Koryo Dynasty (918-1392) and which still has, I am told, a well-preserved traditional quarter. Our itinerary consisted of an hour standing under the huge statue of Kim Il-song that dominates the hill on the city’s northern fringe having explained to us the role “on the spot [page 9] guidance” from Kim played in post-war reconstruction. This was followed by a visit to the local Children’s Palace, one of a network of extra-curricular study and hobby centers across the country. Just as in Pyongyang we were met at the door by young girls instructed to joyously grab our arms and tug us into the first room. One seems to hit a trip-wire upon entering the music room, for serried ranks of young accordionists burst into song, their heads bobbing in synchronized fashion as they sing through the almost clenched teeth their wide, stretched smiles dictate. (The trip-wire can be a hazardous mechanism. On one visit to the Pyongyang Underground I came off the long escalator and onto the platform to be met by a storm of applause and the flash of cameras. It appeared that I had got onto the escalator about thirty seconds ahead of the leader of the Spanish Communist Party.) Just as in Pyongyang too, we saw rooms full of children drawing, painting and even fiddling with tractors. In one room a mild- looking instructor explained that his sub-teen charges were practicing marksmanship. This consisted of using an air rifle on a penny arcade-style shooting gallery where the targets were labelled “Japanese militarist,” ‘‘US imperialist” and ‘‘Pak Chong-hui” He beamed as he explained and insisted we stay for a demonstration.

Finally, there was the usual concert, very professionally produced and starring a string of young prodigies, all honing their talents on songs of praise to Kim Il-song.

For us, this was the end of our tour. We had declined to visit the Museum of US War Atrocities which constituted the final day’s program, and after a protracted struggle were permitted to be driven the 200kms back to P’yongyang out of convoy.

The trip to Paektu-san started with a chartered plane ride to Hyesan, a medium-sized town on the Manchurian border surrounded by the rolling, timbered hills of the far north. Paektu-san is about 60 kms north of Hyesan and is reached over an unpaved road. The road follows the course of the Yalu River at first, a course that is relatively narrow, swift and deep enough to accept river traffic at this stage. The banks are steep, forcing the road to climb steeply at points.

After passing a spectacular fork in the river, the road then follows the course of a small tributary of the Yalu to the little town of Poch’onbo where a huge museum has been built to commemorate a raid on the Japanese police station led by Kim and his guerillas in 1937. The road then leaves the river and passes through a succession of valleys before finally climbing up into the foothills of the Changbaek Range. This is vast, virgin country save for the occasional timber camp, and is quite [page 10] unlike the characteristic scenery of central and southern Korea. Whenever the road rose above the tall pine and birch trees we could see forested hills stretching away to the horizon, or to where the mountain ranges proper intervened.

Following an early morning departure from Hyesan we reached a small hotel built on a secluded, heavily forested lake shore within easy reach of Paektu-san. This was to be our headquarters for day-trips to Paektu-san itself and to various monuments to the activities of Kim and his band during the 1930s.

We were lucky with the weather the following day. Although it was mid-July it was mild and sunny, a perfect day for our visit. A short ride up through the timberline brought us to the base of Paektu-san, which from the outside is only one of a chain of ridges, somewhat mangy-looking, with their volcanic past very evident. Our dirt track now tackled the final slopes of the mountain and finally delivered us to the summit, the rim of the vast crater-lake known as Ch’onji.

Nothing could have prepared us for the magnificent view from the rim. The sight is known to most people via ancient black and white photographs, but its colors are overwhelming. Grey and brown rocks stretch out along the rim in sharp,volcanic formations while on the southern side deeper greens marked the marshy fringes of the lake at the base of long gravel screes. The lake itself is of the deepest, pristine blue, extraordinarily deep in the center and utterly pure in its contents of melted snow and rain water. A disused wooden staircase and half- dismantled ladder led down from the southern side and it was clear that no one goes down to the lakeside any more. The matter of national boundaries has long been in dispute in this area, and as recently as 1970 armed clashes were reported between Korean and Chinese soldiers. To the east the boundary appears fixed at the gorge where the lake’s overflow drops down to become the source of the Tumen River. I was curious about the western side boundary and set off along the rim to see how far one could go, but after negotiating a steep promontory I came to a sudden halt before a deep, eroded gully. There was no way around it without a long detour back down the outer slope, and so no prospect of proceeding to a point where some Chinese presence might be detected. As I stood surveying this, one of our solicitous hosts caught up with me; but my inquiries produced only a broad sweeping gesture and the predictable answer that it was “all our country’s territory.”

It was now time to leave, which we chose to do on foot, treading the thick springy carpet of lichen on the upper slopes past brilliant little [page 11] alpine plants and flowers and tiny pools of melted snow. In front of us a sweeping panorama of mountains and forests stretched away to the south from our 2,700-meter vantage point. Eventually we caught up with our caravan and returned to the hotel.

A trip to Paektu-san would naturally be incomplete without a tour of the several guerrilla camp sites once occupied by Kim Il-song’s band in the region. These tiny camps are now fitted out as holy shrines and receive streams of visitors. They consist of glass-encased camp-fire remains and re-erected tents; the one whose occupancy was ascribed to Kim was fitted out with a coffin-sized glass case around the spot where he slept. Each site has a monument stone, the first few lines devoted to Kim’s full laudatory title “ever-victorious, iron-willed commander, outstanding military strategist and Great Leader of the Korean people KIM IL-SONG...” with the last couple adding the time and place of some unverifiable achievement . Unlike the sombre halls of the extraordinary Museum of the Revolution in P’yongyang, however, these sites do have the advantage of affording a pleasant stroll through the thick birch woods of old Hamgyong Province. In this way, then, Kim identifies himself with the Paektu-san region, a region of almost mystical attachment for many Koreans.

This was the extent of our travels in north Korea. To my intense regret I was unable to visit the Kumgang-san that autumn, and by November we were gone. To believe that under these circumstances I gained a picture of life in north Korea that could be said to be both detailed and true would be simple self-deception. I did not cross the threshhold of a Korean house, eat in a genuinely public place, talk to a single person under 30 or engage in any purely social activity in Korean company. I had perhaps half a dozen personal conversations during the six months we were there.

But the essential outlines are all too clear. It is easy to point to isolated virtues in north Korean society, and journalistic accounts are often dotted with these, the result of the standard, utterly sanitized itinerary the reporters’ visits follow. I differ sharply with the tenor of many of these reports because I stayed much longer and saw a good deal more. Still more important, I do not know of anyone who has had a reasonably broad experience of life in south Korea who can still find words of praise, however qualified, for north Korea without a heavy commitment to the north’s basic political values.2 This is an important consideration as we turn to the people and their culture. [page 12]

As in all communist countries, the Party is more than just the gateway to a comfortable life, it is the arbiter of life and death itself. Amongst these remorseless systems, north Korea is perhaps the most remorseless of all. Its base inequalities are rigorously enforced by an extraordinary degree of penetration into the life of the individual and by a total monopolization of economic activity. Consumer goods are wretchedly few and luxuries unobtainable without Party sanction. I remember seeing groups of Koreans returning home buzzing excitedly around the tiny sales counter at Antung Station to buy little Chinese Knick-Knacks like fountain pens and pearl-handled nail clippers. A ground hostess at Khabarovsk airport in Siberia remarked to me in passing on the huge bundles of clothing Koreans would take with them on their way home. Locally-engaged staff at foreign embassies would ask diplomats to bring them a wide variety of things from abroad, from cigarette lighters to wrist-watches. Perhaps the most surprising request I had was from an interpreter who asked me to get him a couple of English-Korean dictionaries in Japan. I brought back half a dozen and was besieged by other interpreters wanting to buy them.

On the other side of the fence from the gaunt, ill-tailored people in the street were the sleek, dapper high cadres. For them,as the saying goes, communism has arrived. They could be seen disappearing into their well-guarded apartment blocks or casually buying electrical goods at the diplomatic store. An intriguing hint of the extent of this privilege once came my way when I saw a Jaguar sports car with no licence plates wrapped around a light pole on one of the Taedong River bridges. The elite have the privilege of travelling abroad, and they guard it jealously. I once suggested to an interpreter that as an English speaker he would be sent abroad on a mission one day, but be replied despondently that only sons and daughters of high cadres do that. The classic expression for this side of socialism then dropped from his lips as he snorted, “They used to be workers!”

It gives me no pleasure to dwell on images of a downtrodden, regimented populace and a bloated ruling class. Since leaving north Korea I have read similar accounts relating to other societies that share north Korea’s political culture, and this situation is familiar to anyone who has lived in the North for even a short period. Despite this, many ordinary people preserve an air of earthy cheerfulness which I like to think is typically Korean. Our locally-engaged staff – interpreter, driver, cleaning lady – were thoroughly nice people and my office relations with them were much as they had been with their counterparts while I was in Seoul. Day- [page 13] to-day contact was obviously important because it enabled a degree of trust to be set up between us. I had other moments of pleasure - a spontaneous and effusive greeting (in Russian) from a picnicking family, a pleasant conversation with a middle-aged caretaker at a picnic resort area alotted us on the way to Namp’o. The latter had been an industrial worker now pensioned off to lighter duties because of a lung disease,and without knowing any of the background to his case the image of a benevolent government rewarding a loyal worker was pleasant to contemplate.

However moments of pleasure and relief such as these were few and far between and in my case, when I thought back on them, they all took place when the person concerned believed he was alone and unobserved. Not just for me but for the entire foreign community the cumulative effect of this social atmosphere was numbing to the extent that a weekend spent enjoying whatever pleasures Peking during the Mao era could provide was a positive relief.

Thus I cannot really address myself to the questions “How do they really live/ Are they happy?” Beneath this desert of a surface a good deal of variety and interest must obviously exist, because regimes of this ilk direct their attentions foremost to repressing public manifestations of social and cultural heterodoxy, and as long as the individual maintains a facade of orthodoxy he may preserve his private opinions. Thus, one or two north Koreans would ask by way of genuine inquiry, “Are there really a lot of beggars in Seoul?” instead of confidently asserting that this was the case.

Then again, it is important, lest we lapse into the realms of sheer propaganda, to bear in mind that the overwhelming majority of people in any given country see their lot as fairly normal. They are not seeking to oppose or even support their government, but would rather forget about it altogether and get on with day-to-day living. In understanding and giving due weight to this phenomenon I never fail to recall the following passage from Orwell’s 1984. It deserves to be quoted at length.

“In the ramifications of Party doctrine (Julia) had not the faintest interest. Whenever he began to talk of the principles of Ingsoc, double-think, the mutability of the past, and the denial of objective reality, and to use Newspeak words, she became bored and confused and said that she never paid any attention to that kind of thing. One knew that it was all rubbish, so why let oneself be worried by it? She knew when to cheer and when to boo, and that was all one needed. Talking to her, he realized how easy it was to present an appearance of orthodoxy while having no grasp [page 14] whatever of what orthodoxy meant. In a way, the world-view of the Party imposed itself most successfully on people incapable of understanding it. They could be made to accept the most flagrant violations of reality, because they never fully grasped the enormity of what was demanded of them, and were not sufficiently interested in public events to notice what was happening. By lack of understanding they remained sane. They simply swallowed everything, and what they swallowed did them no harm, because it left no residue behind, just as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird.”

Thus, although we met our fair share of politically-inspired nastiness, especially during the course of our expulsion, it should not for a moment be thought that the north Koreans are hate-filled paranoiacs or anything like it. They could be normal and courteous in ordinary situations, even when saying or doing the most unusual things. Our cleaning lady in the chancery was both polite and natural in manner one morning as she observed copies of local newspapers spread on the floor of my office, some with Kim Il-song’s face staring upwards. She then gently told me that perhaps I didn’t know this amounted to disrespect and that I should always keep them off the floor.

Judged by any rational standards, north Korea is still a poor country and probably always will be while such a huge slice of its resources is devoted to the military. The people probably have a sufficient supply of shoddily produced staples, but any real change to their lot is dependent upon a moderation of Kim’s basic militarism, a prospect hard to foresee at present.

Not only must people contend with material poverty but they are also subjected to strong and sustained psychological pressure. There is unrelenting propaganda through hectoring radio speeches and ubiquitous public loudspeakers, endless “lecture meetings,” “study sessions” and rallies. The intensity of it all simply defies the imagination.

The assault on childhood is particularly severe, with children inculcated with basic military values at as early an age as possible. At the showpiece pre-school we visited in P’yongyang the children were coloring in scenes from the legendary life of Kim Il-song, watching a little miniature recreation of the raid on Poch’onbo (complete with colored lights to mark Kim’s lines of approach and withdrawal and flint-sparks for gunfire), while in the playground there were fighter aircraft for swings, artillery positions for merry-go-rounds and pedal tanks for pedal cars.

When we visited a primary school on opening day the children were having their first lesson - memorizing the names, birthdates and birth- [page 15] places of all of Kim’s relatives back to his grandfather. Already at this stage there was direct instruction on the thought of Kim, held in a special study room where a white bust of him stood at the center-front of the classroom with a lectern off to one side for the teacher. School activities all center around the theme of loyalty to the Great Leader, whether in song, dance or extra-curricular activity at the Children’s Palace Weekends are taken up in ‘‘voluntary’’ work and elsewhere I have related how on the road to Namp’o on weekends little parties of teenage children could be seen whitewashing trees and rearranging pebble verges. One weekend I observed them with rags and plastic bowls scrubbing the actual surface of the road.

If they have the antithesis of a natural childhood then there is not much improvement as they get older. No foreign news of any significance reaches the ordinary people, and their intellectual fare consists almost entirely of the “thought” of Kim Il-song which is unique in that it brooks no debate but relies on “unconditional loyalty” for validity. It is the natural counterpart of Kim’s military posturing that he should wish also to be been as a great thinker when even the kindest Marxist critics pronounce its contents indigestible.

The public is dangerously unhinged from reality when it comes to south Korea. It is more than simply portraying the south today as it was in the 1950s. Throughout the summer of 1975 the media were full of lurid reports of the progress of a huge bacteriological warfare experiment being conducted on the civilian population of the south, with deaths recorded in the thousands. It took me a long while before I understood the genesis of this particular propaganda line - the several deaths recorded in the south from haemorrhagic fever every summer.

As modern totalitarian propagandists have long understood, it is necessary in telling a lie to tell one so whopping that your audience either accepts it or has nowhere else to go. Thus it is that the north Korean government not only engages in propaganda of the above type, but has coupled it with a most amazing feat - the almost complete destruction of traditional Korean culture. Documenting this subject is an exceedingly difficult task, mainly because of the ineffability of the term “culture” itself. During my time in Pyongyang I made only scattered observations and can do little more than suggest the possible dimensions of this phenomenon.

At the social level, there appear to be no traditional festival days – Tano and Ch ‘usok passed unobserved while we were there. All holidays are post-1945 creations. No Confucian rites of passage appear to have [page 16] survived, and I saw evidence in the form of overgrown grave sites that ancestral rituals are no longer carried out.

Traditional songs, even basic ones such as “Arirang” and “Toraji” are no longer heard, and judging from the TV and concerts that I saw, Korean traditional music is now excluded from the sphere of officially- approved culture. I heard no kayagums, no ch’anggos, heard no tunes based on Korean melodic scales or rhythms. “Music programs” are made up entirely of either martial music or syrupy paens of praise to Kim, the Revolution or (occasionally) the seasons, all done in the form of the modern Korean art song (kagok) which is almost entirely European in its inspiration.

Also consigned to the underground is almost the whole world of the humanities - literature, history, anthropology, etc. As far as I am aware north Korean scholarship has hardly contributed at all to the field of Korean Studies since the 1960s with its scholars, if they are still able to work on issues in Korean history, unable to present them to international forums. The entire body of traditional literature is now denied a public voice and pre-1945 literary forms such as the sijo are no longer in evidence.

As far as public manifestations of pre-1945 culture are concerned there are almost none. P’yongyang lies in a plain surrounded by rich, ancient tomb sites, but they are never mentioned publically, and access to them by foreigners is unheard of. The gigantic Museum of the Revolution spreads through thirty-plus halls mainly of Kim Il-song memorabilia, whereas the whole of the pre-1945 period is covered in a small building with three exhibition halls full of representative pieces - very similar to minor university museums in Seoul. There are no antique stores, no evidence of modern craftsmanship in traditional areas such as pottery - the examples of the latter I saw were of low quality - and no books of reproductions of traditional art works on sale anywhere.

Traditional belief systems have also been suppressedㅡperhaps the most eloquent spokesman on this score is Kim himself. The following extract is from a record of his conversation with the then Governor of Tokyo, Minobe Ryukichi, in October 1971.

Kim: We did not destroy the prayer¹ houses of religious persons. They were all destroyed by American bombing. Religious persons at first prayed for America. However, when their churches were bombed they came to be against America. For this reason they gave up praying to their “God” or for [page 17] America. For whom did they pray then? They prayed for the development of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea . . . In this way there are no longer any religious persons in our country. There are some believers still left among the old people. Democratic people who visit our country from Italy and France say they wish to see churches, but there are no churches in our country.

Minobe: Are there no Confucian or Buddhist temples?

Kim: There are temples.

Minobe: However, one does not see many of them.

Kim: There are no Confucian temples in the city of Pyongyang. However there are some if you go to remote farm villages. In farm villages there are some old houses which are the same as in the past. Today, however, the people do not believe in Confucianism. People who believed in Confucianism in the past are now all old people. The younger people have all received modern education. Therefore, they are not interested in Confucianism.

How does one account for this type of regime and how did it come about? No clear answers are possible to such questions, but through an understanding of certain qualities of Korean society, communist political culture and Kim’s own background and character, north Korea may become a less incomprehensible country.

The history of Korean communism dates back essentially to the Russian Revolution of 1917. As the ensuing civil war spread eastward to Siberia it engulfed the tens of thousands of Koreans who had been entering and settling in Siberia since the 1880s. The earliest Korean communists were those among this community who rallied to the Red cause both for its own sake and because the Reds offered material support to them for their prime objective, the liberation of Korea from the Japanese.

Attempts to found a Communist Party on Korean soil were slow to materialize and even slower to be put into effect, given the enormous geographical distances involved in organization work and the deep factionalism that had already overtaken the young movement. Finally in 1925 a tiny Party was officially inaugurated in Seoul, where a toehold had been found among urban intellectuals in an otherwise profoundly rural [page 18] and conservative country. Success was shortlived, however, as a combination of internal disunity and Japanese police diligence. saw most of its leaders quickly rounded up. Three further attempts between 1925 and 1928 failed for similar reasons, leading to the abandonment of attempts to establish a Party on Korean soil. Between 1928 and 1945 there was no Communist Party in Korea and communist activities were pursued by a handful of the faithful, drawn from the same urban intellectual class as had attempted to found the first Party in 1925. They resumed organized activities in the south after the war but soon fled north and were extinguished as an identifiable group in one of Kim’s many purges during the mid-1950s.

In tracing the antecedents of present-day north Korean communists, then, we have to look abroad once more, and especially to Manchuria. Southern Manchuria had long been a focus for armed Korean resistance to the Japanese, and the Korean population of about 600,000 provided a solid base of support. The rugged terrain, the weather, and the lack of any major centers of population all made Japanese military penetration difficult; and throughout the 1920s and for much of the 1930s small-scale guerrilla bands were active—some as nationalists, some as communists. Their rate of attrition was high, and as Japanese military operations in the area became more concerted as the 1930s wore on they ceased operations almost completely.

The leader of one of these bands in the late 1930s was Kim Il-song. It is frequently said that there were several people by that name and that the current leader of north Korea is an “impostor.” However, no evidence has ever been found to support this theory, which may have its origin in the idea that the name “Il-song”—“Single Victory”—was a common nom-de-guerre. Kim was born Kim Song-ju near P’yongyang in 1912. His father was a schoolteacher by profession, with strong nationalist convictions which appear to have contributed to the early death of both himself and his wife. Kim first became active in Manchurian communist guerrilla circles around 1930-31 and managed to remain active right through the 1930s. The brief hit-and-run attack on the Japanese police post at Poch’onbo remains his most notable operation. Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, Kim survived. He was never caught by the Japanese, nor did he become a victim of the fierce intra-Party battles of the period. In 1941 sustained Japanese military pressure and Soviet counsel that Japan would shortly be involved in an unwinnable war with the US, during which it was better to sit out and prepare oneself for the post-war future, caused Kim to cross over into Siberia. He spent the [page 19] period 1941-45 in a military camp near Khabarovsk.

Kim’s pre-1945 activities were a tiny part of one theatre of military struggle which was itself a tiny part of the overall political struggle against the Japanese colonial government. It would not be fair to belittle his credentials as a nationalist and as fighter, both of which were as firm as any during the 1930s. Nevertheless, in view of the inflated claims now made about his pre-1945 activities, it is important to recall that he was simply the youthful leader of a band of perhaps several dozen equally youthful men.

The wider background to Kim’s activities is the Japanese colonial period in Korea (1910-1945). It was a period of immense social and cultural trauma for Korea as it became subject to its age-old enemy and an unwilling economic appendage to the Japanese empire. Although one may point to certain benefits of modernization, especially in economic infrastructure, that Korea gained during this period, it is important to view such benefits in the ultimate context of Japanese colonial rule - economic expropriation and exploitation, exclusion from higher education and all but the lowest levels of administration, pervasive internal security, strict censorship, and massive interference in almost every area of tradi-tional Korean life. It was not simply that Japan was culturally insensitive and unwilling to accept significant diversity within her domains. It was also that during the 1930s its policies in Korea were determined by military extremist forces in Japan proper, forces which saw Korea as a vital staging area for expansion into northern China.

Against this overwhelming military superiority the Koreans could do little. Not only had they come into contact with Western technology later than Japan, but like China they had been unable to harness the political energy to deal with the new realities this technology brought. At least part of the reason for this lies in the intensely rural characteristics of Korea as a nation and as a people, for lacking regional urban centers of any size, and never having had a truly feudal system of government the people did not readily accustom themselves to units of organization beyond the personal and family circle. Throughout the modern era the Koreans have shown themselves peculiarly susceptible to political control by an economy of means, and at least part of the explanation seems to lie in the parti- cularist, small-group pattern of their human and social relationships. In the event, Japan ruled Korea with only a modicum of force available for display against a bitterly resentful but quiescent population.

The defeat of the Japanese and the liberation of Korea in 1945, albeit a liberation into the hands of the US and Soviet military authorities, [page 20] unleashed a generation of pent-up political frustrations. In a period of extraordinary turbulence in the south, the body-politic became bitterly fragmented as a multitude of parties struggled against each other and among themselves. It was a striking demonstration of inter-personal relationships contending on a broad political stage, with only an unprepared, somewhat confused US military authority available to referee.

It is with the north during this period that we are properly cortcerned, and although the Soviet authorities must have had to contend with a succession of unforeseen, rapidly developing situations they displayed little confusion. It was clear from the outset that Kim was their chosen instrument of rule in what was to be a classic Soviet satellite.

As the Soviets moved to establish their administration, they had to contend with two major problems. The first was that when the remnants of the old guard Korean communists emerged they adopted Seoul as the logical base of operations, for this was the only place in the country where some sort of urban proletariat could be said to exist. Few came north, thus depriving the Soviets of important local allies. A more important obstacle lay in the fact that P’yongyang had been a particularly strong bastion of indigenous Christianity and, given the leading role played by Christians in the anti-Japanese struggle, moral as well as actual political leadership lay strongly in their hands.

Such obstacles did not long delay the Soviets, however, and with a mixture of coercion and assassination both unreliable communists and non-communists were speedily neutralized. Kim Il-song was rapidly built up as the natural heir to the political leadership of Korea and two months after the Japanese surrender Kim, by now 33,appeared for the first time in P’yongyang, at a public rally in October 1945. Accounts of Kim’s appearance and activities during this period give little evidence of a strong or attractive personality, and his effusive praise of the Soviet system and the Soviet Army - the latter a deeply unpopular army of occupation - can have done little to bolster his nationalist credentials. In the end all this mattered little, however, and within six months he stood out as the leading Korean exercising political authority in Soviet-occupied Korea.

Why did the Soviets pick Kim as their chosen instrument in north Korea? Among the factors that must have recommeded him were the fact that he had no connection with the older domestic Korean communist movement which had so exasperated the Soviets by its ineffectiveness in the 1920s. Also, as we have previously noted, there was a rather high rate of attrition amongst possible candidates from the Manchurian guerrilla campaigns - the chief alternate source of possible Korean communist [page 21] leadership. Then the Soviets had had Kim with them for four years and had obviously come to regard him as a known quantity. These most searching judges of political reliability give no sign of ever having found significant fault with a man who was totally reliant on their favor from 1941 until the mid-50s. We may say with hindsight that they underestimated his ruthlessness and single-mindedness, but they were not deceived in their abiding expectation that he would run things in a thoroughgoing Stalinist manner. Almost thirty years after his chief model’s death he is still doing just that.

Along with the Soviet Army came hundreds of trained Soviet-Korean cadres. These men of dual citizenship held high, often sensitive portfolios in the north Korean Government until the late 1950s, and as in other Soviet-occupied countries at this time, were a classic feature of what we call Soviet satellite states. With close guidance from the Soviet Union north Korea began to develop both a socialist economy and a large army. By 1950 Kim believed he could win a stand-up fight with the disorganized south and, according to Khrushchev’s memoir-Stalin, calculating that the US would not intervene effectively to prevent a short, victorious war, approved Kim’s plans.

As it turned out, the US did intervene determinedly and the war became a horrible disaster for all concerned. For Kim, whose whole adult life had been spent close to the military, it must have been particularly galling to have suffered such a defeat. He personally survived as leader, because Soviet backing remained firm, because of the non-pareil, advantages of incumbency in a Stalinist system, and probably because he kept a tight rein on the north Korean military. The period 1951 to 1957, was however, was a period of great challenge to him mounted by different interests within the Party.

We know little about the nature of these challenges apart from the ritual denunciations of major Party figures that began appearing in the darkest days of the war and which did not stop until the end of the decade. What is very striking, however, is that during this period every current of thought or interpretation of Marxist-Leninism that ran counter to the will of Kim was expunged from the Party. One by one the many and varied streams of Korean communism that had rallied to the north after 1945 now fell by the wayside - veterans of the 1945-50 period from Seoul and other southern communists who had come north in 1950; ex- comrades in arms of the Chinese Communists, many of whom had also fought in Manchuria but had essentially fought for the Chinese Revolution both there and in Yenan; and Soviet-Koreans and others whose past [page 22] links had been predominantly with the Soviet Union. Finally, just as loyal Stalinists were often victimized by Stalin, so too did Kim’s old guerrilla comrades and those with strong post-1945 connections suffer attrition as the Party attained an ideological purity and rigidity unmatched elsewhere, save perhaps in Albania. Kim’s was a triumph of willpower and of manipulative skills, but the tragedy of it is that he has never found anything to place in the many seats he has emptied except self-glorifi- cation and a determination to reduce the whole country to the level of his own intellect.

Since the last of the great purges of the 1950s political leadership in north Korea has been exercised totally by Kim, his family, members of his old Manchurian guerrilla circle with records of attachment going back to pre-1945 days, and by products of the exacting system he has created. Nothing has been allowed even to pose a potential threat to the hold Kim and his group have on power. Politics and policies are seen entirely within their narrow range of experience as guerrilla fighters and Party functionaries. Despite attempts to apply the model of “Red vs. Expert”to north Korea, no one has yet succeeded in identifying “expert” elements in the inner circle. People cited by foreign observers as Foreign Affairs and Industrial “specialists” are usually those who have spent long periods of time in high office exerting monolithic Party control over their portfolios. Similarly, attempts to define an armed forces faction with the Party find great difficulty in identifying distinct armed forces concerns in a highly militarized society. The present image remains one of hard-line mono lithism with dissenters, however marginal, keeping their thoughts to themselves.

There are as yet no economic demands for change, because the economic system remains subordinate to political directives. In the 1960s the north Korean economy achieved a solid, if uneven, record of growth based on almost non-existent consumerism, coerced voluntarism and the considerable natural wealth of the country. Parallel to policies of economic reconstruction, a strong rearmament program was undertaken when in 1962 a basic policy to place equal emphasis on economic reconstruction and military preparation was adopted.

The narrow scope for economic initiative provided by the Party did not appear as a major drawback while a very basic level of reconstruction was the economic goal. As north Korea began to outrun the parameters of Party policies, however, strains appeared, and in the 1970s north Korea incurred sizeable foreign debts when it embarked on an extensive program of capital equipment purchases abroad without any correspond- [page 23] ing liberalization of the internal economic structure. The economic result was much as it has been in Poland, though on a smaller scale, but north Korea has been able to weather this period. Once the consequences became clear its purchases very quickly fell off and its internal economic structure, unctioning largely independent of external influences, survived without discernible change. North Korea still retains a sizeable foreign debt, and the option of an economic leap forward without political compromises has been dropped.

In the foreign sphere, north Korea gradually ceased to be a Soviet satellite in the late 1950s and the Soviet-Koreans chose either to retain north Korean or Soviet citizenship. Many returned to the Soviet Union and almost all who remained departed from office. Since this time Kim appears to have maintained a high degree of independence for such a small state surrounded by two such huge and powerful countries.

Kim’s foreign policy is often represented as playing China and the Soviet Union off against each other, but the intimations of pragmatism and maneverability contained in this model tend to distract attention from his basic domestic imperatives. As an unreconstructed Stalinist Kim was severely put out by Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization campaign and the steady waning of Soviet influence really dates from that point. Kim found he had a lot more in common with the hard-line policies of Mao Tse-tung, and despite occasional ruffles he has remained far closer to basic Chinese positions - both domestic and foreign - ever since.

To an extent, the competing influences of the Soviet Union and China cancel each other out. Neither can hope for decisive influence, and as long as north Korea does not needlessly antagonize one or the other it can expect to exercise a good deal of autonomy in its foreign dealings. Although it has used this autonomy to gain acceptance into the non- aligned movement, a move in which enthusiastic backing from Yugoslavia played an important role, it would be unwise to assume that this broadening of contact has had any effect on basic state policy. North Korea’s foreign policy still issues from Kim’s domestic imperatives, which are to encourage socialist orthodoxy, exert whatever pressure it can on the US and to seek out diplomatic support for its stance on reunification. In the 1970s this led it to especially strong expressions of support for Pol Pot’s regime in Kampuchea, as well as for the Islamic Republic of Iran. In January 1982 it was expressing support for the military rulers of Poland and condemning “the reactionaries who tried to topple the Polish people’s regime.” [page 24]

The demoralizing effects of Japanese colonial rule, the polarizing effects of the Soviet and US occupation period and of the Korean War where millions of people departed who might otherwise have stayed and been a force to be reckoned with, the essential character of Korean society where few institutions not based on the personal or the family tie have found fertile soil, the machinations of the Soviet Union and the sheer determination and ruthlessness of Kim have all contributed to the extremes we see in north Korea today. In the wake of the Korean War, Kim succeeded in purging the Party of all currents of thought counter to the exercise of his own will, and since the late 1950s has possessed the degree of control to implement and sustain what has amounted to a movement as virulent as the Chinese Cultural Revolution, until it now stands unchallenged from within as the accepted reality of north Korean life.

The future holds too many unknowns to be discussed with any great confidence. Clearly, the next significant internal event will be the passing of Kim, for despite his apparently successful attempt to have his son accepted as his successor, and despite the fact that his clique may be expected to struggle hard to ensure their own self-perpetuation as the ruling class of north Korea, Kim’s personal authority has been a key element in sustaining the north Korean system and this is ground for belief that a measure of liberalization must come.

However, one should not automatically assume that qualitative change will take place. Again, we need to refer to the destruction of traditional patterns of life and the purging from the Party of all identifiable traces of liberalism and revisionism over thirty years ago. Where will they go? How will they resolve problems of legitimacy? The experience of the Soviet Union suggests that the legacy of a long dictatorship is extraordinarily difficult to escape, and in north Korea we have seen a more extreme form of Stalinism than Stalin himself ever presided over, en-forced over a much smaller, monocultural population.

Nor can we be certain that pressure for change from outside the Party will be significant. Factors such as consumer demand and regional diversity are all but unknown, and decisive foreign influence is unlikely. We are left with many built-in retardants to change in the current anachronistic reality of a fantastic will to conquer and a strong resolve to defend, set in a country where outsiders have repeatedly involved themselves, all the while knowing little of the country and people whose interests they profess to uphold.

[page 25]

**NOTES**

1. At that time I prefaced my talk with a couple of points of explanation that are still relevant here. The first was that although I am closely involved with the academic field of Korean studies my field of expertise is far removed from modern Korean politics. I am not proposing to write in an academic vein on north Korea but rather am passing on an account of my practical experience in the north, along with the results of my attempts to put those experiences into some sort of perspective.

The second point is that I am writing entirely as a private individual. Since leaving the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs in 1976 I have had no official contacts with any government. As a matter of record, I have never been approached by the Republic of Korea authorities on the matter of my opinions or experiences in the north.

2. It almost, but not quite, goes without saying that when I talk of life in south Korea I am referring not to a political regime but to a social culture which has remained substantially intact from pre-1945 times.