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The Opposite of Freedom: A Journey to Pyongyang

Pierre Garine

The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK)—North Korea. The very mention of the country's name and a blizzard of buzzwords are released: Cult of Personality, Mass starvation, Nuclear-armed, Thought Control, Defectors and Reverse-defectors.

A land completely closed to the outside world? Since the 1960s, a small but steady stream of foreign delegations, diplomats, NGO representatives, and regular tourists have been permitted to visit North Korea, albeit under tightly controlled conditions with official minders watching every move and word.

So, the door is open, and the opportunity presented itself to me (a China-based expatriate)—a four day trip to Pyongyang with a Chinese tour group a few months after the snowy funeral of Dear Leader Kim Jong Il.

But as an anarchist, why visit this graveyard of freedom? What good would come of such a journey? These pointed fingers jabbed me as my plane set down in Dandong, the Manchurian border gateway city on the Yalu River.

The internet-savvy North Korean authorities Google your name to check that you are not a journalist and if it is your first visit, they green light you.

No visa application, just a scan of your passport and a photo.

Chinese pay a low price for the package, EU citizens or Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan Chinese double that and Americans are admitted at a 200 percent, markup, but are denied access to the local train ride from the border to Pyongyang and must fly in from Shenyang on Air Koryo, the North's rickety but functioning airline. My EU passport was a boon in this regard.

An evening walk in Dandong revealed much. On the Chinese side of the river stood towering high-rise luxury apartments, nearby, glaring multi-colored neon displays touting restaurants, Korean-style bathhouses, and hotels. Souvenir shops selling a full line of Korean goods stood alongside Pyongyang-style restaurants staffed with costumed waitresses from the North trying to pull in customers from the sidewalk.

A Christian café provided a base for the bible thumpers reaching out to desperate defectors. Chinese-owned shops hawked second-hand hardware, tools, and generators to the fortunate Northern shoppers holding Chinese currency.

I was reminded of an American or Mexican border town, like El Paso or Juarez. A half-bridge from the Chinese-side (the other half bombed into rubble with precision by the US Air Force early in the Korean War in 1950) was lit up with neon next to the new working road and rail bridge linking China's Dandong with the North Korean city of Sinuiju.

Across the deep river, on the North Korean side, not a single light could be seen. Not a candle, not a cigarette, nothing, only the dim outline of two factory smokestacks and that of a long-halted Ferris wheel at a riverside amusement park.

A Chinese tour member and I looked across silently, then we made our way to one of the North Korean restaurants on the Chinese side which stayed open all night. The gruff middle-aged female

manager holding court at a table with a group of chain smoking border traders swiftly summoned a waitress to take our order as a TV pulled in a grainy official broadcast of the Pyongyang Channel 1 where we could just make out the boy-emperor, Kim Jong Un, engaging in field inspection of some facility. Tomorrow, our bus with a Chinese tour group would cross the Yalu for our four days and three nights in the Paradise for People.

North Korean tourism has its detractors and defenders, and it is safe to call it a moral grey area. As I wrestled with my reasons for visiting, my Chinese companion's motive was pure curiosity.

The Chinese people seemed to look at their North Korean brothers in the way a parent might regard their autistic child. The Mao Revolution had inspired Kim Il Sung and his Korean Workers' Party (KWP) to build a copycat state in the North in 1948, complete with little books of the Supreme Leader's Juche (Self-Sufficiency) philosophy for the people to quote from and wave.

I decided to go, because it was possible. Because maybe I could, against all odds, make contact with someone on the other side and let them know there is an alternative, there is a hope of regaining their freedom, real freedom, not just the right to buy a Big Mac.

I had a few pieces of subversive media I wanted to give away, but I knew that to be caught with something could bring heavy charges for a North Korean. I knew my presence would probably be used by the state and that my minders would be in charge every minute of my visit. Nevertheless, I bought my ticket and took my chance.

The 1960s era Soviet-built train lurched and shook its way across a thawing landscape of fallow farmland, past desolate, barren hillsides and thatched-roofed villages where everyone walked. Not a single bicycle or motorcycle could be seen, it was all foot traffic with the occasional ox-cart. The land looked as if some cosmic hand had gone over it systematically with a blowtorch and a sandblaster.

At the border, there had been second thoughts before the bus, poised at the Yalu bridge, received a green light and the barrier

lifted. The customs shed held a moment of drama as a special comrade was called in by the uniformed inspectors to have a close look at my laptop which the tour office had strongly recommended I leave behind.

While waiting, I couldn't help but notice one of the guards tapping away on an obviously confiscated Apple 4, but the plain-clothes tech gave my deck a quick check and waved me through. I learned later he was looking for Google Maps or a smart app that would give precise coordinates for the military targeting of installations.

Our group had two Korean guides; a Chinese speaking one for the thirty mainland and Hong Kong tourists and an English one for me. Mr. Park was an alert mid-thirties loyalist who would recite the approved line and verse guidance for me but at times would reveal bits about himself.

He had lived in the West as his parents had been North Korean diplomats to some U.N. Agency in North America. He wore the required Kim Jong Il lapel pin and referred to the new successor Kim as, "my General." He steered my questions about North Korean life back at me and regarded my EU passport listing a US birthplace with slight suspicion. Later, he correctly outed me as being an American, at least culturally. He spent much of the trip ignoring me, chatting instead with the female Chinese-speaking guide.

Anarchists in Korea?

Anarchist thought and direct action were a potent third force in the Korean resistance to the Japanese occupation of 1894 to 1945. Since 2000, South Korean government records and school textbooks now honor the lives of four anarchist independence fighters: Shin Chae-ho (1880-1936), Yu Rim (1894-1961), Park Ryol (1902-1972) and Yu Cha-myong (1891 1985).

Another prominent anarchist Kim Jwa-Win, together with independence activists and local peasants, set up a short-lived anarcho-communist zone in ethnic-Korean Manchuria in 1929 known as the autonomous Shinmin region.

The shrill boastings of the regime can be viewed here kcna.kp and its visuals at [youtube.com/user/stimmekoreas](https://www.youtube.com/user/stimmekoreas)

At the border post, there was no inspection as the power went out and we had to sit in total darkness for nearly twenty minutes until the light was restored and our documents returned. I bid Mr. Park goodbye and wished him too, good luck.

Back on the Chinese side, I tried to make sense of it all, but I couldn't. At the Dandong Airport, a Western model stared down at me from a massive brand-name advertisement, as if to mock my efforts. I had bowed to a wax idol and had been fed food denied to the common people.

I had been led past the official sites, but I had also snapped forbidden snapshots and dropped a few leaflets behind; a few pin pricks that would quickly heal. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine a day when the long-oppressed people of North Korea might overthrow the dynasty and liberate themselves without any help from the outside.

Then, I would return to the borderlands and with my slight experience, render some assistance to those stumbling out of the nightmare. I vowed never to forget the people I had seen there and I hope you readers will not forget them either.

Suggested further reading

Nothing to Envy, Barbara Demick—best account in English of the '90s famine with in-depth interviews from defectors from Chongjin, the DPRK's third largest city in the far Northeast.

The Orphan Master's Son, Adam Johnson—a well researched novel in the spirit of Orwell's 1984.

The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps, David Hawk—Shin Dong-Hyuk's incredible escape from the North, also the subject of the new animated film "Camp 14—Total Control Zone."

Koryo Tours koryogroup.com and Young Pioneer Tours youngpioneertours.com

The Daily NK website provides in depth and balance coverage of all issues relating to the DPRK at www.dailynk.com

Park Ryol was arrested in 1923 with his Japanese lover, Fumiko Kaneko, and sentenced to life imprisonment on the charge of planning to assassinate (then) Crown Prince Hirohito. Released from a Japanese prison in 1945, he returned to North Korea. Differing accounts claim he was forced back against his will; another states he joined the ruling KWP and served as government official until his death in 1974.

Other anarchists in Korea were exposed, harassed, and imprisoned by the two new states set up in the North and South between 1945 and 1950. Then, the Korean War of 1950 through 1953 scorched the land, killing an estimated four million civilians.

Our guides ran us through a daily pattern very much designed to keep us moving. After breakfast in the Yanggakdo Hotel (located strategically on an island in the Taedong River and from which we were not allowed to leave at night), we were put on our bus and driven two hours to a distant attraction such as the demilitarized zone border with South Korea, then lunch on the road, then afternoon visits to the monumental landmarks of Pyongyang.

These included an Arch of Triumph slightly larger than the one in Paris, a massive three armed glory monument to the KWP with hands holding a sickle, a hammer, and a calligraphy brush into the sky, and the restored birthplace and childhood home of Kim Il Sung, done up in the style of Stalin.

Then, dinner in another special restaurant for foreign guests (one with singing and dancing waitresses) before we were released to amuse ourselves at our guarded hotel in the evening.

The guides' decisions as to which Pyongyang sites we were permitted to see seemed to depend on the availability of electrical power. In one restaurant, we were led down pitch black hallways, asked to wait while the door was unlocked, and then a few more seconds until the light switch was found and the overhead bulbs flickered into life, revealing an already set table with cold kimchi and Korean starters.

Official access to food, education, rank, and privilege in the North is based on class background and loyalty to the Kim cult.

In 1957, following a post-Korean War census, Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung proclaimed a permanent class system (known as Songbyun or Constituent Origin) which divided all of North Korean society into three groups: a loyal 'core class' (25 percent) of party cadres, a wavering class (55 percent) of average working North Koreans, and a hostile class (20 percent) of former landowners, Christians, or those accused of collaboration with the Japanese or South Korean authorities.

Labels go back three generations and children can grow up without knowing their Songbyun.

Author Barbara Demick, in her excellent 2009 book on daily life in North Korea, *Nothing to Envy*, describes Songbyun as an updated caste system combining elements of both traditional Confucianism and 20th century Stalinism. Grandchildren of the hostile classes are said to have tainted blood, like the Indian Dalits or Untouchables.

During the famine of the early 1990s, brought on by the end of cheap fuel and bartered goods from the Chinese and the former Soviet bloc, Songbyun decided who lived and who starved.

Today, while the North triumphantly announces its latest satellite launch or nuclear weapons test, malnutrition continues in the rural areas with western NGOs issuing occasional reports of starving people desperately gathering wild roots, tree bark, and grasses to make bread or soup. An entire generation of rural children has grown up short, weak, and stunted. One recent party slogan exhorted the population—"Let's all eat two meals a day!"

While the privileged residents of Pyongyang seemed better fed, many could be seen walking the streets with empty carts and shopping baskets, searching for extra protein or rations. Meanwhile, the Kim dynasty smuggles in food, imported alcohol, and luxuries for itself, the Army officer corps, and the party loyalists. The cynical triage of Songbyun writes off nearly half of the population, who must fend for themselves to get enough to eat.

spots for the masses. Then, we were taken to the main Pyongyang train station to catch our rusty train back to the Chinese border.

At a rural station, the main line met a trunk line that pulled off into the bare interior and where there was confusion on the tracks as scores of North Koreans, returning home from a traditional family holiday, were transferring hysterically to and fro. Many, carrying half-full sacks of grain or rice, submitted to spot checks by aggressive, fully armed soldiers. The energy and panic of the people reminded me of earlier scenes of wartime chaos, like Vietnam 1975 or Japan 1945.

Two old women begged our carriage conductors to be allowed to ride without tickets to the next stop but were told no, because there were foreigners aboard. An attempt to photograph the women and give them something brought a quick rebuke from Mr. Park and the cameras were put away. Soldiers ordered the ticketless away and the train pulled out of the station at last.

Underway again, I joined some of the Hong Kong tourists in the dingy club car where a surprised waitress was happy to serve us soju liquor and beer for foreign currency. With a phrase book, we tried to invite some soldiers at the next table to join us for a drink, but they smiled and kept their distance. Then, we were alone.

Making our way between the carriages, the Chinese who had tried to give away the colored pencils pointed to a gap in the protective covering between the cars. He tossed his items through them onto the track. I pulled out the items I had hidden until now— a few leaflets from my archives (anarchist, surrealist, subgenius), all in English, some Western DVDs with Korean subtitles such as "Game of Thrones" Season I (I thought any viewer would recognize the cruel young King Geoffrey), and, in a plastic slip, a copy of *Anarchy Comics*.

Someone scavenging for coal would find them and perhaps they could be explained away if they were caught with the contraband. My feeble attempt at propaganda over, I returned to my seat.

In a final hall there was a display of “A”-class gifts, including a gift of a Michael Jordan autographed NBA basketball sent by President Bill Clinton in 2000, and delivered by Secretary of State Madeline Albright. As I stared at it in amazement, I noticed the two guides arranging our tour into two lines by height in front of the last door. I was assigned a place and we were told to reform the lines once inside the next hall.

We walked in and at the end of this hall, behind a low barrier, was an open diorama, the kind one might see in a natural history museum, with a sunny illuminated outdoor background, and there, in the center was a life-size mannequin of Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung, beaming a waxy smile to us.

Silently, following the guides’ hand signals’ we reassembled our lines. I knew that the North Koreans still considered Kim Il Sung their living President, even though he was 18 years dead. I also knew what was coming next, and I had only had a split second to decide.

Following the guides’ example, both lines of our tour group made a formal bow to the dead wax dummy of the Supreme Leader, holding it for at least a minute. Mr. Park looked sideways at me directly. My mind in rebellion, I slowly allowed my head to nod forward in the slightest of bows.

Then, shuffling in our clean room cloth overshoes, we made our way out. I could still feel the false eyes of the Supreme Leader’s mannequin burning into my back as I exited. I swore to get back my dignity, somehow, later. The younger version of myself would have shouted something and made a futile gesture then and there. Instead, I would save mine for later.

On our last morning, on the way to the train, we were allowed ten minutes to briefly roam the massive Kim Il Sung Square, the site of the mass million man rallies and military march-bys. A high, temple-like supreme reviewing stand looked down on the empty square. Painted numbers on the cobble stones marked the standing

While I made sure my conduct did not attract the suspicion of my guide, some of the Chinese in our group had more courage and attempted spontaneous acts of charity.

At one rural museum a regular road passed in front and one tour member attempted to give away boxes of colored pencils to grade-school aged children walking by. They ran away in fright and he earned himself a tongue lashing from the Chinese-speaking guide. “No North Koreans will accept such gifts from a stranger, they are provided with everything they need!”

In August of this year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) held public hearings in Seoul in the Republic of [South] Korea to investigate the whole spectrum of the crimes against humanity carried out by North Korea. The very few survivors and escapees from the North’s Gulag Archipelago of forced labor and punishment camps gave their testimony to an international body for the first time.

Shin Dong-Hyuk was born in one such camp in 1982 and only escaped in 2005. His story is the subject of a 2003 book by David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea’s Prison Camps* and a new animated documentary by German director Mark Weise, “Camp 14–Total Control Zone.”

At age 14, Shin heard his mother and brother discussing an escape and, in an attempt to gain better treatment, he informed on them. For his trouble, he was tortured and then, with his father, forced to watch, along with the rest of the camp inmates, as guards shot his brother and hung his mother. The powerful documentary also includes accounts from a camp guard commander and a former secret police member who also defected to the South, strengthening the accuracy of Shin’s account of camp life.

Any number of crimes from illegally crossing the border with China, smuggling food, DVDs, or banned literature, to overheard complaints or listening to or watching foreign broadcasts can earn one a possibly one-way trip to the camps. There, prisoners live in a vacuum, without the hope that anyone even knows of their fate.

Conditions are, in the words of one survivor, worse than the Nazi extermination camps in that at least those WWII era inmates knew the Allies were waging war non-stop against the Germans and that liberation was a possibility. Certainly, some of these inmates, labeled as enemies of the state, must be our comrades in spirit.

At our hotel in Pyongyang, in its cavernous basement network of halls and shops, there is an entertainment facility open to the local elites. It includes restaurants, a bowling alley, karaoke, bars, and a swimming pool/sauna complex. For foreigners with hard currency, there was even a Macau Chinese-run casino.

Residence in the capital is a privilege and to ensure loyalty, access to food and such entertainments are rewards from the Red Emperors.

Later, I met some Russian diplomats in the three-lane bowling alley and we talked about the new boy-ruler. "His Western education means little," said one to me between rolling strikes. "He has a role to play, and that is upholding the system created by his grandfather. There will be minor reforms and some peace offerings to the South, but that will be all."

At one point, our group was waiting at a special entrance to the railway station and as we stood in front of a small group of North Koreans who regarded us in silence, I smiled at one middle-aged man and, in a deliberate voice, spoke two words to him in English, "Good luck." He smiled back and repeated my greeting, but by then the door opened and we were hustled into our special waiting room.

The North Korean economy today survives mainly on barter exports of minerals and rare earth metals with the Chinese, thus, maintaining a lifeline through the long list of U.N. and Western-issued sanctions. China, having fought for the North in 1950 through 1953, looks the other way at the border as these sanctions are breached. After the North's latest rocket/satellite test, in a rare rebuke, China temporarily shut down the operations

of North Korea's largest bank in Beijing, their only clearing house for finance and trade.

For their part, the Chinese have repeatedly invited North Korean leaders and officials to visit and see for themselves the results of China's free-market, state-managed, economic reforms, advising their comrades that they could create more wealth for the elites and food for their people while maintaining single party control. Except for a few reforms like tolerated trader markets (called *jangmadang*), the North has maintained its system of state control under the moribund self-sufficiency philosophy of *Juche*. In the border regions near China, technically cross-border trade by individual North Koreans, both permitted and illicit, has also brought in DVDs of Chinese, South Korean, and Western movies and TV serials as well as Chinese cell phones capable of international dialing.

At the very least, the state's iron lock on the minds of its population has at last been broken.

On day two of the tour, our bus took us north into the mountains to a resort town and it was there we were shown the crown jewels of the regime. Past guards with silver-plated AK-47s, we were ushered into two separate treasure palaces, built deep into the mountain side, with museum hall after hall displaying every single gift ever brought by a visiting world leader or delegation to bestow upon Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung and Dear Leader Kim Jong Il.

I saw a gold-plated scimitar from Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, a pearl inlaid desk from Hafez al-Assad of Syria, an ornate carpet from the last communist president of Afghanistan, a bullet-proof limousine from Stalin and hall after hall of thousands of smaller offerings of tribute—paper weights, portraits, stuffed animals, carvings and books, never to be read. Here, North Koreans are shown how the whole world respects their country and honors its leaders.

I knew that this is how our presence as tourists was explained to the average person in North Korea. I knew I made myself a willing pawn through my curiosity to see all this and it gritted my teeth to even think about it.