**THE TRAITOR’S GUIDE TO NORTH KOREA**

**Morten Traavik**

YOUR TRAVEL GUIDE TO THE WORLD’S MOST SECRET COUNTRY

Forræderens guide til Nord-Korea. Din veiviser i verdens hemmeligste land (Aschehoug, 2018)

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*Trust is good*

*But control is better*

LENIN

*His longing for a new world,*

*however, is always balanced*

*by regret for the world that must be*

*destroyed to make way for it.*

ROBERT CHANDLER

*we do what we’re told*

*we do what we’re told*

*we do what we’re told*

*told to do*

*one doubt*

*one voice*

*one war*

*one truth*

*one dream*

PETER GABRIEL

TO MY WHOLE FAMILY

AND FRODE BERG

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Pyongyang, March 4, 2011

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**LETTER FROM A TRAITOR**

Trust is love. - KIM JONG IL

*Dear Mr. Win,*

*My remaining sources in Pyongyang tell me you’re still alive.*

*What’s more, you’ve apparently been transferred to a less demanding position in another, quieter division of the Ministry. If that is the case, I’m genuinely relieved and happy for you. I was never only angry about what happened between us, and never at you alone. You were, however, the one who threatened in private that morning to kill me or have me killed.*

*“Let me put it this way: One small bullet …”*

*The little office became even hotter and stickier. The bitter smoke from your local cigarettes – which I only smoke as a last resort – swirled up to the ceiling.*

*“… one small bullet from a rifle can kill only one man.”*

*A long, long pause.*

*“We’ll see what happens.”*

*At the time, it was pretty disturbing. You hadn’t been yourself for quite some time already and were slowly but surely becoming more and more of a stranger to me – a brooding, destructive and unpredictable demon who barely spoke or understood the language of humans. But suspicion and hostility were on the rise all over Pyongyang at the time, to a degree I’d never experienced before. Not least, your words were given what we might call a certain extra resonance by the fact that North Korea, just a few days earlier, had surprised the world with its biggest nuclear testing to date, ten times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. You weren’t there in the hotel lobby when I and the other pale and – quite literally – shaken foreign visitors watched the extra newsflash on the state TV channel, in which North Korea declared itself the world’s newest nuclear power. Maybe you were out drinking somewhere. But over the past year, I’ve been asking myself whether your death threat may have held some deeper meaning. There was something in the tone of your voice, something sad and soft rather than angry and hard. In any case, I remember feeling much more saddened than scared. The worst part was the suspicion that began spreading backwards at that point, poisoning everything that had led up to that moment between us. Had it all been an act from the start? That nagging, retroactive doubt, casting a shadow over all the years of our friendship, pulled us even further into the darkness that for some time had been looming above us, gathering over the country and the city. But now, according to my local sources, you appear to have returned to the safe side, your safe side, as I have to mine. And for you to ever read this, your whole existence – in other words, the whole country and system of North Korea – would have to collapse first. Alternatively, you’d have to become one of the traitors the state protects you all from and scares you with, from morning to night, all year long, throughout your lives. Both for your own sake and that of the rest of the population, I hope neither will happen for some time yet.*

*No matter what, neither of us can get around the fact that it is you I am I writing to. You were and will always be my North Korean travelling companion, interpreter, fixer, joint venture partner, crisis manager, drinking buddy, friend and foe and friend and foe all over again … To airbrush you out of my North Korea would not only be impossible, but also misleading, and unfair to the man you once were and someday, I hope, can become once again. I therefore beg your tacit forgiveness for dragging you along again on this one last journey, because no-one I know of can give North Korea a face more human than yours.*

*Thank you, my friend.*

**The beauty of a man lies not in his looks but in his ideological and moral traits. - KIM JONG IL**

*Your real name, like most Korean names, is a combination of three short syllables. Each of these is composed of the relatively few standard characters that are the building blocks of written Korean. When the whole name is used, the surname – Kim, for example – is placed in front of a usually two-syllable first name, and the stress is always on the last syllable: Kim Jong* Un*. Even without the inevitable connotations of goose step and slavish discipline your country is saddled with in the eyes of the world, I find that Korean easily lends itself to the language and tone of command, whether it’s barked out Gangnam style by South Korean pop stars or sonorously declaimed Pyongyang style by North Korean newsreaders in a robust staccato with resonant diphthongs and sentence intonations counting down to an explosive exclamation mark:*

IL-SIM-DAN-GYOL! *[[1]](#footnote-1)*

*I’ll risk leaving your globally anonymous “first name” unchanged, since I call you Mister in real life too. This isn’t just a phonetic foreign body in the Korean language, but also somewhat politically incorrect in North Korea’s thoroughly politicised official vocabulary. “Mister” is a title with roots in the feudal societies of the past and implies a form of politeness and subservience at odds with the socialist ideal of equality and brotherhood. The capitalist marionettes of the South are happy to call each other “Mr.” and “Mrs.”, but you northerners use the term dongji instead, corresponding to the soviet Russian tovarisch, the (East) German Genosse and the English comrade. In North Korea, people address you as [your first name]-dongji, but neither you nor any of your colleagues at the Ministry – excuse me, your work comrades – mind it when I call you Mister Kim, Mister Choi and so on.*

*Both of us enjoy being a bit naughty, of course, a bit politically incorrect, and this attitude we share is one of the many delicate little threads that have bound us together during the years of our collaboration. For me at least, it’s also quite simply a matter of white man’s convenience – sticking to the rhythms my tongue and brain have become accustomed to throughout a life immersed in languages far from the Korean. The double syllable first, then the single syllable.*

*“Win”, on the other hand, is a name I’ve chosen specially for this occasion. It both sounds and looks Korean and resembles a number of typical Korean surnames, such as Won, Shin, Min, Mun and Wi. The actual combination “Win”, however, doesn’t exist in Korea, even though it sounds like it could have. Like so many things North Korean, in other words, the codename I’ve given you is plausible, but not entirely true.*

*We both carry a lot of baggage from home. In my part of the world, as you very well know, the country and system you serve – for the two are a single-hearted unity, of course – are known, amongst other things, as “a gruesome dictatorship”, “the world’s most conformist and fear-based society”, “an absurd, ghastly, totalitarian prison camp” and the recurring: “the closest we’ve come to National Socialism since The Third Reich.” To sum it up: “The world’s most isolated country and the world’s worst regime.” I imagine you shaking your head in quiet, almost amused resignation. You know as well as I do that any foreigner who has any dealings with North Korea – in any capacity other than reluctant diplomat, concerned aid worker or finger-wagging human rights activist – is considered fair game for the attacks of the righteously indignant. Let me mention a small selection of distinctions our work together has earned me over the years: “useful idiot to the horror regime”, “immoral and egocentric”, “propaganda tool for one of the worst regimes in history,” “naïve collaborationist” and last, but not least: “Vidkun Quisling. Morten Traavik. Jørn Andersen.” [[2]](#footnote-2)*

*Your own baggage is at least as heavy as mine, although the content is different. Your employer – “the world’s worst regime” – is quite unimpressed with the society I grew up in and identify with: “imperialist ideology and culture”, “Western books and films full of decadence” and “spiritual and cultural poison” are but a few examples taken from the North Korean state media.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

*We both know that prejudices aren’t something you can just leave behind in a safety deposit box when you enter a country. You may remember your countryman the music professor, who took part in a guest ensemble we arranged in Norway a few years ago, and whose belief in the evils of capitalism were confirmed when he needed to use the toilet in Frogner Park.*

*This usually lovable and unassuming Korean gentleman was unable to hide his deep contempt for a society so thoroughly corrupted by rampant capitalism that it even charges money for the most basic of human needs! At least, he said, it was good for the students he had brought along, and would serve as a warning to them, to see with their own eyes just how ruthless capitalism really is. When your own government and the system you serve describe yourselves, on the other hand, the tone is quite different – and again, let me emphasise that the selection of quotes here is random and limited, since there really is no end to the material at hand: “The light of Asia since the dawn of time”, “the land of the morning calm”, “a dream of living a prosperous life in a thriving socialist nation which is now transformed into reality”[[4]](#footnote-4), “a politically independent, economically self-sufficient and militarily alert socialist power”[[5]](#footnote-5), “a knowledge-based economic giant”, or as your own President for Eternity puts it:*

*Ours is a single nation with 5000 years of history, it is a valorous, ambitious nation that has been vigorously fighting against foreign invaders and successive reactionary rulers from olden times, and it is a talented nation that has contributed greatly to mankind’s development of science and culture.*

*You and other representatives of North Korea who are regularly in contact with foreigners and are trusted enough to be allowed to travel far beyond the country’s borders, are naturally all very aware of the utter contradiction – and bitter conflict – between these heavily entrenched and strictly policed worldviews. Any visitor to your country – all more or less suspicious in your eyes, whether they are atomic energy inspectors, charter tourists, heads of state or aid workers – share a common daydream of cracking the North Korean Code, an adventurous hope of unveiling as much as possible of the “real North Korea behind the façade”, and, not least, to be the very first outsider to do so.*

*This supposed contrast between “real” and “fake”, “authentic” and “staged”, is something we Europeans and our descendants in the New World have cultivated since ancient Greek times – often against our own better judgement. But old habits die hard, as I’m sure you know. You and your gatekeeper colleagues can sense all of this – you smell the blood of a Christian, as the saying goes in our Norwegian folk tales. The more curious and insistent we become, the more you hold back, which of course makes us even more curious, and so it goes on – the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object.*

*Your exaggerated suspicion seems almost comic to us, but the truth is that it conceals an almost touching naivety and keeps it in check. Many times, it has struck me how bad you North Koreans are, or rather how bad you allow yourselves to be, at judging foreigners. You simply can’t tell who your friends and foes really are. And how could it be otherwise? Your system doesn’t exactly reward excessive curiosity about the outside world and its impulses, to put it mildly.*

*The day independent backpacking is allowed in North Korea – or at least becomes conceivable – you may find yourself smiling at the story of an acquaintance of mine, who was approached on a summer day at the bottom of Karl Johan Street (you’ve been there) by a pair of polite backpackers. Where, they wondered, could they get hold of typical Norwegian souvenirs, such as troll figurines? Since they were standing in the middle of a what is arguably the world’s highest-density souvenir troll location, my indigenous friend must have looked slightly bemused, but as you know, foreigners sometimes need a helping hand. Hesitating slightly, he pointed towards the rows of cheap shops and souvenir stalls lining Norway’s parade street, and mumbled: “Well, you should probably just…” With a slightly overbearing smile, the two young adventurers brushed his suggestion aside, leaned in and looked at him meaningfully. “No, no, we don’t mean the tourist tat. Where do you Norwegians buy your trolls?”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

*But apart from these primal urges, we explorers of North Korea are a pretty mixed crowd. For some of us, a trip to North Korea is a test of manhood, for others a pilgrimage, for a select few almost a matter of routine. Most of us you will meet only once, and when you do, we’ll usually go out of our way to humour you, either out of exaggerated politeness, fear, or both. That is why I believe there are many things along the road we’re about to travel that neither you nor your own people know, or have been allowed to know, about North Korea and those who seek it out. A view from the outside is both the thing your country fears the most and the thing it needs the most. Both with good reason, if you ask me. Here, anyway, is a collection of basic facts about your country that most outsiders with an opinion on the matter more or less seem to agree upon:*

**(Quite reliable)**

**COUNTRY FACTS**

**Flag: Red, white and blue**

The red colour of the flag of the DPRK represents the blood of the revolutionary forerunners and comrades-in-arms, the white colour the pure loyalty of our service personnel and people who support our Party, and the blue colour or high and beautiful dreams and ambition. - KIM JONG UN

**NAME: THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK)**

*Founded by Kim Il Sung on September 9, Juche 37 (1948), an independent socialist state protecting the Korean people’s interests, where the masses are the rulers of all things and all things serve the masses. Despite being constantly busy after liberation, Kim Il Sung gave the question of the new state’s name a lot of thought. Some found the name too long, pointing out that other countries had shorter names. The president answered nonetheless that we are the ones who decide the name of our country, the way its people – the country’s true rulers – demand.[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Both inside and outside North Korea, this somewhat intractable name is usually abbreviated with the English initials DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea). [[8]](#footnote-8)

As visitors, this is the official appellation you will hear, more often than not, from the state-employed guides who also act as your interpreters, fixers and of course minders.

However, hardly anyone will be offended if you use the internationally prevalent name – North Korea – which is also easier to remember. Nor will you risk sanctions or any kind of unpleasantness. In fact, in the official terminology – the state’s origin story, if you will – the two Koreas are also referred to as “north” and “south”, although always with lowercase initials: “north Korea” and “south Korea”. According to the state narrative, the partition of the Korean Peninsula is of course merely a temporary state of affairs, and to use capital letters would be to implicitly accept the unnatural division of a people and country that are one and the same.

**THE NORTH KOREAN KALENDAR: JUCHE**

The Korean Peninsula is located in the same time zone as Japan, seven hours ahead of Norway. But North Korea flaunts a *calendar* all of its own: *Juche* (pronounced *choo-che*) is named after the state ideology and was officially introduced in 1997, when the three-year mourning period following Kim Il Sung’s death came to an end. Juche begins with Kim Il Sung’s birth in 1912, which isn’t Year Zero, since it would be inappropriate (and risky) to denote The Great Leader’s birthdate as *nothing*. This is the reason why our Gregorian 1912 corresponds to Juche 1, and the centenary of Kim Il Sung’s birth was celebrated in 2012 as Juche 101. What’s more, North Korea has no form of BK and AK dating (before and after Kim), and even in the homeland of Juche, the official calendar is used somewhat half-heartedly.

Both in the national media and foreign-language publications, dates are usually quoted alongside the Western calendar, for example: Juche 107 (2018).

**LOCATION: IN THE MIDDLE OF EAST ASIA[[9]](#footnote-9)**

To the north, the rivers Amnok (in Chinese: Yalu) and Tuman (Tumen) form a 1420 km long natural frontier with China (North Korea’s longest border). At its easternmost point, the border ends in a trijunction where the two countries meet Russia. Norway’s neighbour to the east shares a 17 km stretch of frontier with North Korea – Russia’s shortest and easternmost border. Which is long enough, of course, to amply justify a Norwegian wanting to please his North Korean hosts with a friendship toast or two to the fact that we only have one country between us. To the east lies another regional superpower, Japan, with which both Koreas have a complex and historically fraught relationship. For hundreds of years, China and Japan took turns dominating and at times colonising the whole Korean Peninsula.

From this squeezed-in position between three superpowers comes the Korean expression “a shrimp among whales” and the saying: “Between fighting whales, the shrimp is crushed.”

Most people, however, will have heard a lot more about the third, southern border with “the other Korea”, known all over the world as the DMZ (De-Militarized Zone). It is along this highly militarised border line one understands what it actually means that North Korea has been at war for almost 70 years – not only ideologically, but quite physically and literally. The Korean Armistice Agreement, which was signed in 1953 by the warring parties in the Korean War and marked the end of hostilities, is merely a truce, not a declaration of lasting peace. Formally and technically, North Korea is still at war, not only with its arch-enemies South Korea and the US, but also with the United Nations and thus the whole world – you and me, if you will.

**SPREADING DISCOCRACY**

**(MORTEN THE THIRD)**

Foreign activities are very delicate political activities that demand keen political insight, the greatest prudence and a rich knowledge of etiquette. – KIM JONG IL.

2008. The ageing Tupolev model that forms the backbone of Air Koryo’s somewhat antiquated fleet of ex-Soviet airplanes humps laboriously towards the terminal in the distance. The seemingly endless landing strip makes taxiing feel like a ten-minute drive along country roads. Reportedly, the airstrip was designed to be long and tortuous in order to delay American warplanes in the event of a new Korean War. The population here is given constant reminders that this is an imminent threat. I unbuckle the shackles of my well-worn ex-Soviet airplane seat and grab my first souvenir from a world apart: a cardboard fan with the Air Koryo logo on it, handed out by the stewardesses before take-off because the air conditioning was down. Under my arm, I carry a disco ball marked Eurolite, 30 centimetres in diameter, “the classic effect with a stable plastic core and genuine glass mirror facets 10 X 10 mm”.

In doing so, I am probably not only violating the North Korean regime’s strict ban against all forms of Western culture, but also the equally strict Western sanctions against importing them.[[10]](#footnote-10) We are in the era of Kim Jong Il and George W. Bush, and seven years are yet to pass before the airport will be expanded and modernised under the wise and caring guidance of Kim the Third. Sunan remains North Korea’s only international airport. It is built to deal with a maximum traffic load of one inbound *or* outbound flight a day, and is no bigger than a medium-sized Norwegian regional airport such as Kirkenes or Kristiansand.

Since the airport’s heyday – if that’s the right expression – all regular air connections with the outside world (which were never very frequent in the first place) have been discontinued, except for the last umbilical cord, Peking-Pyongyang. To be able to cope with even just one daily flight, North Korea’s own Air Koryo splits the week with Air China – and we’re talking workdays only, of course. Weekends are quiet at Sunan International Airport.

So here I am. In North Korea! A destination for the restless and perhaps slightly maladjusted adventurer, since those of us who seek the place out often feel a certain aversion towards our own home-grown brand of modernity: the relentless pace of life, the alienation, the commodification and so on. The world is shrinking, as are the polar ice caps and jungles: Thailand is the new Mallorca, Vietnam the new Provence. Tibet is almost as packed with Chinese tourists as the Fish Market in Bergen in July. Yet deep inside a true Lionheart lies the explorer’s irrepressible yearning for the Promised Land. A place yet to be *discovered.* A place where the wild things are.

The terminal building is crowned with the letters PYONGYANG in Korean signs along one side of the flat roof, and Latin letters opposite. In the middle, several metres tall, towers a portrait of a beaming Kim Il Sung, who after abandoning his mortal shell in 1994 has worked on tirelessly as North Korea’s *President for Eternity –*the world’s only dead head of state. For a first-time visitor to North Korea and Pyongyang, the composition comes across as a quite unequivocal instruction to regard these three new acquaintances – the country, the city and the man – as one and the same.

If you long to get away from it all, you’ve come to the right place. In customs, my mobile phone is impounded by two gruff uniformed inspectors with an English (perhaps even overall?) vocabulary consisting of exactly two words: “cell” and “phone!” In return, I am handed a receipt as translucent and brittle as old rolling tobacco paper, and I pray in my heart that the custom officers’ duplicate won’t reach the last stages of disintegration during my stay. And so I say goodbye to the wide web and globalised chaos of the world. Ahead, North Korea’s isolated cosmos awaits. In less than two weeks (if all goes well) I’ll be able to reconnect with the outside world again.

An ancient Japanese minibus from the host organisation is waiting for me in the half-empty parking lot outside the terminal. All of my sense impressions have an alluring, bittersweet taste of bygone Eastern bloc. Outside the window, a landscape glides by that looks like what I imagine Norwegian rural areas must have been like in the 1930s, before the mechanisation of agriculture. Here and there, a traffic constable leans on a veteran motorcycle. A few people are riding bicycles (for some reason, there are only ladies’ bicycles in North Korea). Everyone else is either walking or bent over thin wisps of green in a brownish, dusty sea of meagre farmland. This antipastoral scene from the Middle Ages could just as well have belonged to a poor, but more colourful and photogenic country like Cambodia or Laos, had it not been for the cool morning air and the almost Nordic landscape of bare mountains in the distance. We Norwegians often forget how unique our own regional policies are in a global context, ensuring almost as a national article of faith that rural communities remain thriving, prosperous and well-populated. Unfortunately, like many other countries, North Korea has yet to be inspired by us in this area, and the contrast between dreary outskirts and imposing capital are as glaring here as they are in other developing countries like Pakistan and Uganda. None of my hosts mention the mirror ball glittering in the autumn sun on the car seat next to me like an egg from outer space. Is it out of politeness? Ignorance? Disgust? Raising a warning finger to the country’s youth, the party organ and voice of truth *Rodong Sinmun* (The Worker’s Newspaper) regularly rails against various forms of creeping democratisation: “The imperialist strategy is to make young people mental cripples infected with the virus of reactionary ideologies and corrupt bourgeois way of life and use them in its efforts to disintegrate those countries advocating independence against imperialism!”

It’s no surprise, then, that I carry in my mental baggage a solid and perhaps not entirely unfounded expectation that all forms of “reactionary and corrupt bourgeois culture”[[11]](#footnote-11), which my imported mirror ball, after all, could easily be taken to represent, are strictly prohibited in North Korea.

Like so many other visitors to this suspicious country, I am travelling – at least partly – under false colours. Of course I am. But for the time being at least, my North Korean hosts seem blissfully unsuspecting and believe that I am an ordinary and guileless tourist. Being as cut off as they are from the Internet and the international media, I assume they don’t have a clue as to what an *intervention artist* might be. Just a few months ago, the disco ball on the seat next to me was glittering above the heads of the finalists in the world’s first beauty pageant for landmine victims, held in the capital of Angola, Luanda, with a formidable national and international press corps in attendance. The winner was crowned by the country’s First Lady in a sparkling banquet hall not far from the national monument to Angola’s first president, Augustino Neto, which, incidentally, was designed and built by North Korean architects. Many had written off the Miss Landmine project in advance (rightly so, for that matter) as unrealistic and unworkable. In the end, however, its international breakthrough was so big that I now have wind in my sails and a taste for other seemingly impossible projects in “difficult” countries. The disco ball is my lucky talisman and a feeler I’m throwing out to see if I can find any leeway at all for a similar artistic intervention in North Korean society. My initial plan is to take a series of photos of myself all dressed up like a classic Western playboy in a designer suit and tie, with Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses, posing with the disco ball under my arm in all or as many as possible of the destinations we’re meant to visit during my stay. I’ve decided to call the series *Discocracy.[[12]](#footnote-12)*

**PYONGYANG: THE CITY CENTRE[[13]](#footnote-13)**

He who builds monuments, cares for their safety and guarantees their maintenance forever, is a true patriot. – KIM JONG UN

North Korea’s capital and biggest city lies along the Taedong River (in Korean: *Taedonggang*) on a vast plain where the southwestern lowlands meet the eastern and northern mountain ranges. The name Pyongyang can mean both “flatland” and “peaceful place.”

The city’s history can be traced at least as far back as the fifth century A.D., when the imperial Koguryo dynasty made it its capital. But because the old Pyongyang was razed to the ground by half a million American bombs during the Korean War, the city had to be rebuilt from scratch, which also allowed it to be tailored to practical and ideological needs. That’s why there are extremely few statues around the country of historical figures outside the Kim dynasty, and few or none at all from the time *before* Kim (B.K.).

Part of the aid package from Stalin’s Soviet Union and its satellite states in the Eastern Bloc during the reconstruction of Pyongyang were architects and engineers from North Korea’s European counterpart, the German Democratic Republic. The East Germans clearly came equipped with their own experiences from a bombed-out capital and gave the new Pyongyang an orderly, open and airy layout, with a number of large parks and green lungs which still give North Korea’s capital the distinct feel of an Asian East Berlin.

Driving south from the airport towards the city centre, one sees Pyongyang’s TV tower, a smaller version of the GDR capital’s famous landmark, the Fernsehturm, silhouetted against the sky on a hill above **Pyongyang’s Arch of Triumph**. The arch is an even more obvious plagiarism of foreign models. Here as elsewhere, however, the North Koreans have added a few touches of their own: a layered hat of stylised roofs in the typical East Asian style make the North Korean copy ten metres taller than its French, spiritual sperm donor. The Arch of Triumph was built to celebrate Kim Il Sung’s seventieth birthday on April 15, 1982, along with another landmark of central Pyongyang waiting just around the corner. The monument is dedicated to the Resistance and the country’s victory over the Japanese, with the official dates of the struggle’s beginning (1925) and end (1945) engraved in its pillars. It’s hardly a coincidence that Pyongyang’s city planners made the only access route from the airport to the city centre pass through this awe-inspiring, concrete colossus. The effect is that of driving both through a physical gate to the city and a symbolic portal into the Pyongyang universe. And *there* we go, passing under the concrete arch.

The bus drives on along the mildly rolling side of the lush **Moran Hill**, Pyongyang’s own Central Park and a popular destination on public holidays, which, oddly enough, often seem to coincide with the Leaders’ birthdays. The hill also lends its name to the closest thing the country has produced, so far, to modern pop stars: Kim Jong Un’s own “house band”, the girl band **Moranbong.** This unique North Korean blend of the Spice Girls and the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo performed in public for the first time in the summer of 2012, reportedly at the request of the recently appointed Supreme Leader himself. The repertoire, naturally, is of the edifying variety – Kim-pop? – and can be divided into two main genres: earnest love ballads to the Leaders, such as “We Call Him Father” and patriotic girl scout versions of Seventies disco pop, Baccara-style, such as “The Train To The Future”. With their short-skirted officer’s uniforms and prim, yet mildly suggestive onstage moves, Moranbong’s image has been quite aptly defined in the Western press as “totalitarian with a hint of naughty*”.* Their greatest hit to date is the ruthlessly catchy “We Will Go to Mount Paektu” (*Garira Paektusan Urô*) from 2015. It is a tribute to the Kim dynasty scantily dressed up in mountain-hiking metaphors. On the other side of the road from the Moran Park, we pass the **Chollima Statue**, one of many examples of the North Korean state propaganda apparatus’s ingenious use of pan-Korean myths, legends and folklore. According to a folk tale, Chollima is the name of a winged horse almost identical to the Pegasus of Greek mythology, who could run (or fly) one thousand *ri* or 400 kilometres in a day.[[14]](#footnote-14) Chollima roamed the country looking for a rider who could break it in, but eventually had to give up and flew up to heaven instead. The statue “symbolises the heroic zeal and indomitable resolve of our people, who with their incessant creativity continue breaking new ground in the spirit of Chollima.” When the bombed-out city of Pyongyang and the rest of North Korea was being rebuilt after the Korean War, the authorities mobilised the masses to a collective “voluntary” effort by means of a national public awareness campaign, *Chollima Speed*, which was clearly inspired by Mao and The Great Leap Forward. Chollima Speed has entered the North Korean vocabulary and remains a well-known term, especially to those who remember the reconstruction effort and the following years. Lately, however, the term is getting tough competition from the capital’s own *Pyongyang Speed.* As our bus approaches the top of Mansu Hill (Mansudae), the road takes a long and gradual right turn. All of a sudden, we are Lilliputians gazing up at Gulliver or awe-struck natives at the feet of the mighty Kim Kong. At the top of the hill, two 22-metre tall idols rear up, the centrepiece of the **Mansudae Grand Monument**, which was inaugurated on Kim Il Sung’s sixtieth birthday in 1972 and thus (knowingly) set the bar quite high for well-wishers planning future birthday bashes. The statue of North Korea’s national patriarch, towering in lonely majesty at the time, was reportedly covered in gold leaf for the first few years of its existence. But after China’s then-deputy Prime Minister and future leader, Deng Xiaoping, made it very clear to his North Korean hosts during a state visit that gilded statues were incompatible with the ideals of socialism, the gold was replaced with a somewhat less sumptuous layer of bronze.

After Kim Jong Il’s death in December 2011, a new building effort was set to Chollima and Pyongyang Speed combined, and in April 2012 a statue of the Son was unveiled next to the Father. The duo, of equal height, is flanked by two symmetrical, 50-metre long, 22.5-metre tall marble wings in the shape of unfurled, red Socialist flags, like a stage curtain opening to a standing ovation. The wing on the right, or to the north if you’re facing the statues, is dedicated to “The anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle,” while the one on the left honours “Socialist reconstruction” after the Korean War. Each of the flags also form a backdrop to a grand parade of Communism’s standard catalogue of action figures: five-metre tall workers, peasants and guerrilla soldiers staring boldly into a glorious future with their rifles, shovels and mining picks raised victoriously above their heads. Since its inauguration, the Mansudae monument has become the country’s most important public shrine. All year round, a steady stream of schoolchildren dressed in distinctive Young Pioneer uniforms, companies of conscripts from provincial garrisons, friendship associations and common people walk up the terraced hill and the boulevard-wide stairs beneath Mansu Hill to lay down wreaths and bow deeply and deferentially at the giants’ feet. The whole monument gains further perspective, depth and symbolic heft against the enormous mosaic of Mount Paektu behind it, covering half the foremost sidewall of the **Museum of the Korean Revolution**. Here, 54,000 square metres and over 90 exhibition halls are dedicated to the “Revolution”, that is to say the history of North Korea, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.

The whole official narrative of the two first generations of the Kim dynasty unfolds over a total wall length spanning more than 4.5 kilometres. This means that as a visitor, you never get to see, and perhaps never feel the need to see, the collection in its entirety. A respectful female guide[[15]](#footnote-15) dressed in the national costume *jogori*, reminiscent of a tulle dress, leads you politely, but firmly through the world’s biggest scrapbook: room after room plastered from knee-height to ceiling with slogans, quotes, newspaper articles, hero paintings and photos, mostly in Korean. You’ll listen to recordings of radio speeches and study a proportionately small, but important section dedicated to the Leaders’ theoretical works – memoirs, speeches and political treatises – published in a respectable selection of world languages. Notice also that all depictions of the Leaders are lovingly framed in thick gold thread, while all direct quotes (from party organs, interviews and so on) “make do” with silver thread. In all publications printed in North Korea, regardless of language, the Leaders’ names are always typeset in slightly bigger letters than the rest of the text. The Leaders’ utterances are usually typeset in bold, which can sometimes spoil the suspense in the state-authorised collections of anecdotes about their lives and exploits, for example when an anonymous “man of noble appearance” offers a ride to a poor old lady who finds herself stranded alone on a country road in the middle of nowhere. When he shouts “**Wait, old lady!**”, the alert reader already suspects what is going on. North Koreans half hope and half expect that you, like them, will want to pay your respects to their Eternal President and Eternal Chairman. For decades it was standard procedure for all new arrivals – it didn’t matter if you were a tourist, an aid worker or an ambassador – to be driven straight from the airport to the foot of the statue of the Great Leader, to ritually bow and place a wreath before being allowed to check in to your hotel or diplomatic residence.

In keeping with the relative softening-up of recent years, the North Korean hosts are going easier on their demands, and they now often give you a day or two after arrival before it’s time to step up and bend the knee. Despite what many believe, it’s quite all right to refrain from bowing if you have ethical qualms about the submission ritual. But if you want to avoid making your guides uncomfortable, it’s considered polite to stand at a certain distance from the part of the group that chooses to approach the statues and go through the moves. It’s also perfectly all right to take pictures, but as your guides are bound to remind you more than once over the course of your stay, any picture of Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il must include the *whole* subject – meaning that the angle you choose must never be allowed to crop the Leaders’ full figures or faces. Today is arrival day, however, so we won’t have to deal with these rules for the time being. Mansudae disappears in the rear-view mirror as the bus drives on down the gentle slope, towards the intersection in front of the distinctive, cylindrical high-rise buildings along **Changjon Street.** Get your camera ready! With a bit of luck, we’ll run into a red light and have orchestra seats to a show featuring some of Pyongyang’s unknown stars: In recent years, the tautly uniformed female traffic constables with their commanding whistles, batons and precisely choreographed moves have finally had a bit of moderate traffic to direct. Even during the worst years of the energy crisis, these clockwork ballerina-like figures impassively presided over the inexistent traffic of the giant boulevards in a unique blend of the exotic, the beautiful, the moving and the disturbing that in many ways represents the North Korean experience in a nutshell.

Taking a right now down Changjon, we head towards the **Supreme People’s Assembly**. North Korea’s National Assembly occupies yet another neo-classicist concrete colossus at the foot of Mansu Hill, set apart from the Grand Monument by a picturesque fountain park. Every time I pass this imposing concrete structure, I think of one elected representative in particular, and a man in a brown jacket:

**CHOICES, CHOICES**

The leader, the party and the masses form a common entity sharing a life-and-death destiny. – KIM JONG Il

One should always be wary of countries that proclaim a religion or an ideology in their name. A state system presenting itself to the world as “The Islamic Republic”, “The People’s Republic”, “The Democratic Republic” and the like is rarely a paradise of freedom of thought and expression. Here as in so many other areas, The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea follows the principle that you can’t have too much of a good thing, and hedges its bets. What many people don’t know is that the North Korean state actually goes to the trouble of holding regular elections – almost like the real thing! The Supreme People’s Assembly consists of almost 700 representatives, one from each of the country’s constituencies, who are elected for five-year terms in general elections where the constituency’s electorate votes for its preferred candidate. To spare voters the agonies of choice, the authorities decide in advance which candidate is the preferred one, since there is only one candidate for each constituency. The overwhelming majority of these candidates – over 600 at any given time – belong to the sole governing party, the Worker’s Party of Korea (WPK): a safe basis, in other words, for forming a stable government. The rest of the representatives come from two of the supporting or “prop” parties, which largely exist to lend a certain credibility to the D in DPRK.

On a sunny election day in the spring of 2014, in the company of Bent and Pål, a journalist and a cameraman from Norwegian TV2 for whom Mr. Win and I have obtained access to the country, I set out to report from the general mood in Electoral District 17 in central Pyongyang. We set up our camera in front of the entrance to the polling station, where a long line of North Koreans dressed in their Sunday best await their turns under a large, colourful poster bearing the motto:

MARCH 9 IS ELECTION DAY FOR THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PEOPLE’S ASSEMBLY! EVERYONE, LET US SHOW OUR VOTE OF AGREEMENT!

The big, open square is lavishly decorated with garlands and balloons. Off to the side, a group of well-dressed voters of both sexes dance to the frisky tones of Moranbong’s “We Will Go to Mount Paektu”, either out of sheer joy, one imagines, after having voted YES!, or because they can hardly wait to do so. At the end of the queue, a voting booth awaits where citizens cast their votes under the encouraging smiles from two large portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Mr. Win, slightly stressed as usual, has made arrangements for TV2 to interview the district’s electoral supervisor, and taken it upon himself to act as an interpreter, both between two different languages and two diverging definitions of representative government:

*TV2: Do you always sing and dance and get all dressed up to celebrate the election?*

*The electoral supervisor:* Yes, of course, spirits are always high when we choose our representatives to the People’s Assembly! Our electoral law prescribes creating events that lend a festive atmosphere to the electoral process. People aren’t celebrating because it’s mandatory, but because it’s election day for the People’s Assembly. Anyone over the age of 17 is going out to vote anyway, so they’re expressing their joy over voting for their representative to the People’s Assembly. The people (*points to the dancing voters in the background*) have nominated their candidate themselves, so they’re happy that someone they’ve chosen will be working for them.

*TV2:* *How many parties are running for election?*

(Mr. Win, in Korean, to the electoral supervisor):

*Elections are being held in other districts too, of course … Are there other parties besides the Worker’s Party of Korea represented in other districts, for example the Chondo-party, or, you know …*

(has forgotten the name of the last of North Korea’s three existing parties)

… *the other one … Do candidates from other parties get elected too?*

*The electoral supervisor:* Sure, there are candidates like that too.

(Our allotted time with the electoral supervisor has come to an end. He thanks us and hurries off, finding a place to stand a bit further away. A voter, Mr. Rim Gwang Hun, also stands close by.)

*TV2: How does it feel to be here and to vote today?*

*Rim Gwang Hun:* On this election day I am especially reminded of how marshal Kim Jong Un and the people are of a single heart and a single will.

*TV2:* *This looks like … a big day for people here. Can you tell us a bit about what’s going on?*

*Mr. Win* (in Korean, to Mr. Rim): *In Norway, for instance, election day isn’t really that different from any other day, but here we have celebrations and parties everywhere.*

*Rim Gwang Hun:* Yes, today is a special day for the party, for marshal Kim Jong Un and for the people. The election reflects the people’s choice of their own representatives, so the day couldn’t have been better.

*TV2: What do you expect from your candidates once they’re elected to the National Assembly?*

*Rim Gwang Hun:* They’ll give their all and work tirelessly to repay the people who elected them. With the trust the people have given them, they must work for the people, the party and our marshal. They must defer to the people and what is best for the people and show their commitment. They have the people’s complete trust because that is what the people expect of them.

(We move on to Mr. Han Kwang Hak, a factory worker, also out doing his civic duty.)

*TV2: Can you tell us what it feels like to vote here today?*

*Han Kwang Hak:* This election is in line with the Songun Principle. It strengthens the nation, reaffirms our socialist ideals and is an important opportunity to show the Korean people’s determination and will.

*TV2:* *It feels like a really special day for the citizens of Pyongyang.*

*Han Kwang Hak:* It’s a wonderful day, because this is the day that shows us how to make use of our rights as citizens.

*TV2: Usually in Norway, only about sixty percent of people entitled to vote participate in general elections. What do you think the attendance will be in this election?*

*Han Kwang Hak:* Oh, all registered voters will be participating in the election, of course. There’s a mobile polling station that visits people who can’t make it to the polling station on their own, for example the sick or disabled. So we expect a one hundred percent attendance.

(Finally we get to speak to the actual candidate for Electoral District 17, Jo Gil Nyo, an unassuming little woman in her fifties who has dressed up for the occasion, like most of the other women, in the national costume *joseonot*. She looks constantly incredulous and amused at the foreign reporter’s questions.)

*TV2: Are you excited about the election?*

*Mrs. Jo:* I’m so proud, my heart is about to burst! As a simple worker in the Public Roads Administration, I could never have dreamed of such an honour!

*TV2:* *Do you think you’re going to win here in District 17 today?*

*Mrs. Jo (laughs):* I’m not sure everyone is going to vote “yes”, but we’ll just have to wait for the results …

*Authoritative man in brown jacket (interrupts in Korean and gestures to Mr. Win to get him to translate):* Our comrade here *(motions to Mrs. Jo)* has already been through the initial selection process approving her candidacy, so today’s election is just the final stage of the process. It’s perfectly normal for these voters to dance for joy.

*TV2* (to Mrs. Jo): *What will be your signature issues as a representative of the National Assembly?*

*Mr. Win* (confused, in Korean to Mrs. Jo): *Which issues will be important to you once you’ve been elected … You see, this is a question about your position and areas of responsibility …*

*Authoritative man in brown jacket* (interrupts in Korean again, gestures to Mr. Win to make him translate): Our comrade here (*gestures to Mrs Jo)* is a group leader in the Public Roads Administration, where she will go on performing her duties. It’s not like she can leave her job just like that … On the other hand, she will of course be participating in the Assembly’s debates whenever there are special issues at stake for the country.

It is here, then, in the Supreme People’s Assembly just off to our right, that the newly elected Mrs. Jo Gil Nyo will be dealing with the challenges of the country along with her newly elected colleagues over the next five years … If, that is, the Public Roads Administration can spare her from time to time.

Continuing our tour of the city, we head straight ahead along **Sungni Street**, a main artery of central Pyongyang that runs parallel to the lazy course of the Taedong River a block away. Keep your cameras ready, because Sungni is about to cross the symbolic heart of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, **Kim Il Sung Square**, modelled after its Soviet and Chinese big brothers. According to North Korea’s own guidebooks, all of the country’s main roads begin here, in front of the oblong pavilion at one end, decorated with portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and flanked by low stone bleachers. From this platform, the Kim currently in office receives the people’s adoring tribute during the gigantic and meticulously staged mass parades for which the country quite rightly has become both famous and infamous.

*Dear Mr. Win,*

*The first and decisive investigation into the limits of the North Korean state’s tolerance takes place on National Day itself, September 9, 2008, a few years before you entered my life.*

*The scene is the grand parade celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of the DPRK, and all of Pyongyang has once again been mobilised to display its unflinching loyalty.*

*As part of the peculiar friendship association I’m travelling with for the occasion, the Ministry has invited me to attend this gigantic demonstration of national unity and purity on Kim Il Sung Square. Here, hundreds of thousands of festively dressed citizens will soon form a human mosaic of colourful propaganda messages, specially made to be viewed at an angle from the leadership’s elevated tribune above. These masses will form a backdrop to endless ranks of stiffly goose-stepping soldiers and convoys of cannons and rockets. The mood is hectic and expectant, and the crowds are packed and sweaty like commuters on a train at rush hour. Security measures around the whole inner city are stricter than airport security checks on steroids. We foreigners have received thorough admonitions about making sure we hold on to the entry IDs our Korean facilitators have handed out. If we lose them, we lose all hope of getting through the eye of the needle to the standing tribune for VIP guests flanking the leadership tribune itself. We’ve also been asked to dress up as nicely as we can.*

*Entering the square itself, we pass several metal detector checkpoints, first a series of small, beeping, hand-held models briskly rubbed up and down our already sweaty bodies by enlisted soldiers, then the usual portals we’re familiar with from airports all over the world. It is rumoured that the beloved leader Kim Jong Il himself will be here to bless the masses and receive their unanimous adulation on this great day. The possibility of smuggling in anything at all that could conceivably look like an assassination weapon must therefore be utterly eliminated. The disco ball I carry under my arm is still sparkling like crazy on this fine day and casting little dancing specks of reflected sunlight in a 360-degree radius, both on me and the uniforms and faces of the officers guarding this final security checkpoint before we’re allowed in. All the ball lacks to make it resemble a poorly camouflaged, old-fashioned hand bomb, is a fuse, or perhaps it looks more like a gay landmine.*

*Now that the gravity and solemnity of the occasion really hits us with full force, I am ready, at best, to part with my disco ball at the checkpoint, but also, if worst comes to worst, to get kicked off the square. Apparently, our designated spots are only a few metres away from the place where Kim Jong Il is going to stand. I try to look friendly and relaxed while one of the stone-faced officers points to the foreign body I’m carrying and asks one of our guides a question in Korean. Our guide dutifully translates: “He wants to know what that thing is, and why you’ve brought it.” I swallow and take a deep breath. In the language of movies, this is what we call suspense – a frozen moment that could lead to just about anything.*

*I clear my throat. “Well, this is a, ehm, so-called disco ball. Where I come from, we use them as decoration when people get together to dance, have fun and celebrate great occasions like the one we’re celebrating today. As you can see, it spreads the sun’s rays in a beautiful way, so that as many people as possible can feel and enjoy its warmth. The thing is, in my part of the world, a lot of people are under the delusion that joy and warmth are prohibited in the DPRK, because of the many misunderstandings circulating about your country, as you may have heard. Yeah, I know, it’s ridiculous, right? That’s why I brought the mirror ball and this camera right here – check it if you want, no problem – to take some pictures that show how the DPRK is actually much more open and hospitable than most people think, even on a day as important as this one is for your country. In this way, the mirror ball could become a symbol of peace and understanding between different nations, if it helps people in my part of the world shape a more correct opinion of your country and its proud culture.”*

*Two minutes later I’m standing in my designated VIP spot, dressed in my designer outfit with the mirror ball safe and sound under my arm, less than twenty metres away from the place where Kim Jong Il probably will be appearing shortly. Another uniformed officer standing guard on the tribune itself gives me the thumbs-up sign and wants his picture taken with me and the ball.*

*I thought you might appreciate the story, since I don’t think I’ve ever told you the full version. I also think you’ll nod in recognition at this first dress rehearsal for my way of communicating and negotiating with the North Koreans, which I’ve had plenty of opportunities to refine since then, with you as my slightly nervous assistant: presenting an unknown content in a familiar form.*

Kim Il Sung Square was – naturally – one of the first public works to be completed during reconstruction after the Korean War, and was suitably inaugurated with a proper military parade as early as 1954, the year after the ceasefire was signed. Crossing the football stadium-sized square on foot, you’ll notice a mesh of tens of thousands of tiny white circles painted right on the flagstones, each with its own number next to it. These come in handy when a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people, soldiers and civilians alike, is supposed to act as “a single great heart and mind” composed of smaller sections lined up with millimetre precision.

Watch out so you don’t turn your head too fast and sprain your neck now that we’re just zipping by: At the opposite end of the elevated platform, Kim Jong Il Square opens out towards the Taedong River and the **Juche Tower** (self-portrait with disco ball: no problem), mirrored in the water from the other riverbank and facing the leaders’ platform less than a kilometre away. Along with the Arch of Triumph, the tower was the other big “surprise” Kim Il Sung received on his seventieth birthday. It was a gift from his increasingly favoured son and heir, Kim Jong Il, who had figured out years earlier that his father liked to be reminded (and remind others) of his own great achievements – half-invented though they may be – like having liberated the country and invented a worldwide ideology.

The 25,550 stone blocks forming the tower equal the number of days in the Great Leader’s life. According to the North Koreans, the 170-metre tall Juche Tower is the world’s tallest granite structure. It is crowned with a 20-metre high flame sculpted in semi-transparent red glass and metal, and illuminated from within. This beacon of Socialism with a Korean Face has shone nonstop since its inauguration. Perhaps the light from the red torch reached the full height of its symbolic effect during the years of the Arduous March, when the energy crisis was at its worst. Even today, surrounded by a more reliably illuminated capital, the Juche Tower maintains a look that is both solemn and slightly ominous, like a mutation of the Washington monument and Tolkien’s Barad-dûr, with Sauron’s flaming eye staring straight into the soul of the weak of faith.

A lift on the inside goes all the way up to a balcony right under the base of the torch, affording a 360-degree panoramic view and photographic radius over the city and beyond. Inside the base at the opposite end of the tower, there are embedded plaques reportedly sent from “Juche study groups” all over the world, most of them from the 1970s, when the international prospects of the Juche ideology were looking a bit brighter than they are today. Amongst contributions from Juche superpowers like Benin, Slovakia and Finland, we also find the “Group for the study of comrade Kim Il Sung’s Juche Thought in Bergen, Norway, May 26, 1976”, which has been given pride of place near the entry door. In front of the foot of the tower, on the side facing Kim Il Sung Square, a group of bronze sculptures stand tall, with a worker, a farmer and an intellectual lifting their favourite tools above their heads – the hammer, the sickle and the paintbrush – to form the party symbol. Like the party symbol (and so much else in North Korea) the statue is inspired – to the very highest degree – by Soviet models. In this case, it is Vera Mukhina’s well known *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*,from the height of the Stalin era, that has been given the honour of plagiarism with a Korean face.

If the bus hasn’t reached the corner of the next block already, we can turn around and take another quick look at the opposite end of Kim Il Sung Square. Now we’re just in time to catch a glimpse of the mighty building with the reversely arched gable roof in the East Asian style, towering right behind the parade pavilion and looking, at a distance, like an extension of it. **The Grand People’s Study House** reminds us that we are much further east, after all, than old East Berlin. Despite the Forbidden City-like façade, the Grand People’s Study House is just that, a gigantic combination of national library, a venue for evening classes and further education, and a reading hall for ordinary students. (Self-portrait with disco ball: no problem whatsoever.)

Now that our bus is heading south on Sungni again, for the past fifteen minutes we’ve been moving through a geographic rectangle split in two roughly equal parts by the Taedong River. The short sides of the rectangle are composed, respectively, of two straight axes between Kim Il Sung Square and the Juche Tower, and the Mansudae Grand Monument and the **Monument to the Foundation of the Worker’s Party**, which can be seen in the distance on the other side of the river if you stand with your back to the two Kim statues. This big old bundle of charm – which was inaugurated to mark the party’s 50th anniversary and is therefore, of course, 50 metres tall – is, like the statue at the foot of the Juche Tower a few blocks away, a variation of the party symbol’s hammer, sickle and paintbrush in three-dimensional form. Three clenched concrete fists lift these symbolic tools towards the sky and are held together by a circular concrete belt (a halo, perhaps?) bearing the motto: “Long live the Worker’s Party of Korea, organiser and guide to the Korean people’s triumph!” (Self-portrait with disco ball: sure, and I added an electric guitar the year after.) Seen from the inside of this “circus ring”, the belt is decorated with bronze reliefs celebrating the different phases of the “glorious road the Worker’s Party of Korea has travelled”, and also …

What, you’re tired already?! We’ve barely seen a fifth of it yet!

Sure, your first and possibly only visit to North Korea can easily end up feeling like a triathlon of monuments, statues, memorials, museums, prestige constructions, mausoleums and (a hundred and) fifty shades of Kim. For years and years, the regime has been chiselling away, digging into, pruning, sculpting, fortifying and leaving its mark for the foreseeable future on the country’s physical surface, like a deranged plastic surgeon attempting to recreate his loved one in his own image. *I am the state – which means you are too*. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that those who only visit Pyongyang and North Korea once barely have the time or the opportunity to debunk the oft-imported cliché that the whole city and the country are just one big, elaborate theatre set.

Another common Western characterisation of the city, “show window”, also carries a suggestion of something artificial and staged. (Where do North Koreans *really* buy their trolls?) A contributing factor to this sense of a staged production is the absence of the chaotic variety of impressions most of us are used to from home: the cacophony of big city noises, neon commercials, street garbage, sidewalk cafés, variations in skin colour and clothes style. Contrasts. Conflicts. The human condition.

With that kind of mental baggage as a yardstick, it’s no wonder Pyongyang and the rest of North Korea come across as disturbingly well-ordered and homogeneous. To be sure, real life in North Korea *is* both controlled and hierarchical, but it is far from artificial. It is made of flesh and blood, concrete and steel. It may seem like an unnecessary truism, but Pyongyang and its inhabitants are still there after we turn off the lights in our hotel room.

Speaking of which, we’re approaching our hotel now and will soon be able to check in our jet-lagged, aching bones. For practical purposes, for example that it’s easier to keep tabs on us that way, most Western tourists in Pyongyang who haven’t explicitly asked for it well in advance will receive accommodation in a handful of approved hotels. Usually it will be the **Yanggakdo International Hotel,** the biggest in the country with its 1000 rooms rising up in splendid isolation over the homonymous island in the Taedong River. Geographically, the Yanggakdo Hotel is located in the middle of the city, where the river veers through the southwestern part of central Pyongyang, but only one bridge connects the island to the mainland. For this reason, it is impractical and tiring to get to the city centre and back again in anything other than a safe tourist bus with the rest of your group. Nor does Yanggak Island have any residential areas, which basically makes it a well-planned tourist reserve, playfully known to North Korean connoisseurs as *Alcatraz –*a nickname that will gain an even darker ring during tragic events a few years later. Luckily, however, nobody knows about that yet. Despite its centrally remote location, the hotel has several good cafés and restaurants, particularly the rotating one at the top of the building where you’ll be able to take your first, tentative steps into the country’s perhaps surprisingly abundant *cuisine*.

**FOOD AND DRINK**

You have to experience hunger before you can know when hour stomach is full. – KIM JONG IL

A common characteristic of the hotel dining halls where you’ll be eating most of your meals is that few, if any, of the waitresses (they’re always ladies) speak a word of any foreign language, despite being very service-minded and friendly. Nor can you really rely on the English-language menus, with their disturbing wording, such as “raw sliced crap” and “strange flavour chicken”. So turn it into an adventure instead! North Korea is a clean country with a climate not unlike that of Scandinavia, so the risk that you’ll contract anything more serious than a bout of ordinary traveller’s tummy is actually quite low.

This language barrier isn’t as absurd as it can seem at first, by the way. Knowledge of languages equals flow of information, and qualifications of that kind are reserved for trusted associates who deal with foreigners in more controlled settings. The tourist guides and minders assigned to foreign guests always work in pairs, naturally, to keep an eye not only on the group, but each other as well.

If you get your Korean guides to join you for a bit of partying out on the town – and you should definitely give it a try – you may notice that North Korean bars and restaurants often have a slightly secluded, closed-in feel to them. They’re the complete opposite of Nordic airiness and light. Maybe it’s because so much of life in the country is about people looking over your shoulder. Most North Koreans don’t enjoy being on display in their leisure time. Many restaurants have booth-like cubicles between the tables, where the most desirable and prestigious seating arrangement is to have your own little dining room, which gives you some privacy while also making it clear that you’re an important and wealthy person. Despite having a lot in common with both the Chinese (noodles and dumplings) and the Japanese (maki and tempura) cuisines, Korean food has an entirely distinct identity in a regional context. Key ingredients are chili and garlic, which are used in almost everything.

One striking aspect are the many side dishes. Sometimes it feels like the whole meal consists of nothing but trimmings. We’ll spare you a long and largely meaningless list of dishes with exotic-sounding names, which you probably won’t have the time or the opportunity to try during your hectic stay. Instead, inspired by the leadership’s well known on-the-spot guidance, we’ve made a small selection of key (and not least *authentic*) recipes, which will give you a little taste of the “most secretive country in the world” and perhaps also allow you to impress your family and friends.[[16]](#footnote-16)

RECIPE:

**COLD PYONGYANG NOODLES**

*(Pyongyang Raengmyon)*

As far as I can tell, Mr. Win generally has as little interest in food as he has in art and culture. His everyday diet could have belonged to a Western heavy metal rocker in the Seventies. It consists of a constant stream of local Kumgangsan cigarettes, local Taedonggang beer, shots of the Korean national drink, *soju*, and dirty jokes. He seems quite simply to find food boring – yet another area in which he stands out, in a culture that attaches a lot of importance to food, both as a culinary experience and as a mark of national identity. One of a few exceptions to the rule is the capital’s signature dish, which Mr. Win devours with great relish. To quote the DPRK Cooks Association:

“Pyongyang Raengmyon is a one of a kind cold noodle dish made with aromatic buckwheat flour. It is famous for its chewy yet tender noodles, unique and flavorful broth, and garnishes, which come served in a special metal bowl. This is a dish suited for any time of day, but is especially good for treating hangover.”

So maybe it isn’t *only* a question of taste that makes Mr. Win order Pyongyang noodles so often. The dish also has devotees higher up in the system, where it was served as North Korea’s contribution to the dinner menu during the summit between South Korea’s president Moon Jae In and Kim Jong Un in April 2018.

INGREDIENTS

**COLD PYONGYANG NOODLES**

(1 portion)

1 litre water

100g beef

100g pork

50g chicken

1 tbsp. salt

1 ½ tbsp. soy sauce

1 tbsp. sugar

1 tbsp. chopped spring onion

1 tbsp. clear vinegar

50g cabbage kimchi

50g radish kimchi

60g cucumber

1 tsp. ground red chili pepper (gochugaru)

2 cloves garlic

1 tsp. ground black pepper

40g asian pear

1 tsp. baking soda

400g buckwheat flour

100g hard-boiled eggs

HOW TO MAKE IT

**COLD PYONGYANG NOODLES**

1. In a stock pot, bring beef, pork, and chicken to a boil until the meat is very tender, then remove meat. Season with broth with salt, soy sauce, green onion, and ground black pepper then put aside to chill.
2. Thinly slice beef and pork. Tear chicken into bite sized pieces and soak in a bit of broth to keep moist. Chop the cabbage and radish kimchi into roughly the same size pieces as the meat, cut the cucumbers lengthwise then cut diagonally into thin slices, mix these ingredients together with salt, vinegar, ground red chili pepper, chopped green onion, minced garlic, and sugar. In a separate bowl, julienne the asian pear.
3. For the noodles, mix together baking soda with hot water (70ºC) then add buckwheat flour to make a dough.[[17]](#footnote-17) Put the dough through a noodle press directly into boiling hot water, stirring gently to prevent noodles from sticking together. When the noodles float to the top, drain into a colander and rinse 2-3 times under cold water. Strain well.
4. To serve, dip the noodles into the chilled broth, then place in bowl. Top with kimchi and cucumber mixture, meat, pear, and half a hardboiled egg. Pour in the broth. Serve with vinegar and soy sauce.

**BROTHERHOOD**

The seed, wherever it takes root, spreads its branches and opens its flowers to the sun.

KIM JONG IL

*Dear Mr. Win,*

*I won’t reveal too much about how and when we met and became friends and brothers. Let’s just say that our friendship has drawn a lot of its fuel (mainly liquid) from late nights in hotel bars and at restaurant tables around large parts of your country. A competitive instinct is also something we share. We both like the sound of the word Win in our common language, English. At your insistence, we’ve played countless rounds of smoky hotel pool, boozy table tennis and parking-lot football with doll-sized goals. You, of course, always dressed in an office shirt and formal shoes. At the shooting range we’ve had our pick of air rifles, pistols, modified AK47s and live chickens. Win some, lose some.*

*All of the banter and playful bickering you often encourage between us when we’re with other people, even people we’ve just met, is our party piece and ice-breaking trick. Wherever we go, we begin our meetings with this little Laurel and Hardy routine, making even the most solemn vice minister break into a smile. It’s another reason why I think the name Win suits you.*

*You: “Puh, he’s just a* nong taegi *from Norway.”*

*Me: “Nonsense,* he’s *the Great Korean Nong Taegi.[[18]](#footnote-18) I’m* Nor Wei Widaehan Nol Sae.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

*I deliberately use the word widaehan, as in The Great Leader (Widaehan Suryong) Kim Il Sung, an expression familiar to all North Koreans. So far, it’s brought nothing but laughter and smiles in response. The last time I visited North Korea, I finally decided to take the chance that the otherwise very thorough baggage inspectors at Pyongyang airport had never heard of George Orwell. As you no doubt remember, I actually managed to bring* All Art is Propaganda *into the country.* *(Don’t worry, I brought it back out again!) To be honest, I seriously considered trying my luck with* 1984 *as well, but ended up deciding against it, as the cover of the edition I had in my bookcase at home would perhaps communicate a bit too clearly across language borders (Big Brother’s eternal eye surrounded by red stars and barbed wire against a night-black background).*

*Anyway, since North Korea and Orwell so often are mentioned in the same breath in my part of the word, I picked it up again a few months ago, twenty years after I read it for the first time. The book’s main character and antihero, the civil servant Winston Smith, is described already on page two:* “He moved over to the window, a smallish, frail figure, the meagreness of his body merely emphasised by the blue overalls which were the uniform of the Party.[[20]](#footnote-20)

*You’re a skinny figure of slightly less than average height, in your early-to-mid-forties – not in blue overalls, to be sure, but bearing the equally universal and anonymising uniform of the civil servant all over the world: white shirt, tie and suit trousers flapping loosely around a body as lean as a stray dog’s. Win-ston. Win-dow. Win-dongji. My window to North Korea. Like Orwell’s Winston, you’re a typical member of* “the outer elite”, *the party’s outer circle, the ideological “middle class” on the scale between the secretive and all-powerful “inner elite” and the great, silent (or silenced) majority of workers, peasants and lumpen proletariat – or “proles”, as Winston calls them.*

*Like you, I belong to my society’s outer elite. We artists – a term I use only reluctantly about myself, by the way, in lack of better alternatives – hold, along with academics, media people and others from the layer of society we call “the middle class”, a certain superficial power over hearts and minds in my part of the world. Very few of us are rich in financial terms, and even fewer in terms of political influence, but art and culture can at its best (and especially at its worst) have a certain influence on public opinion (“the proles”). Therefore, a kind of spiritual nobility is often attributed to us (or we attribute it to ourselves) that some people call “culture capital”. This cultural capital is (unfortunately) an entirely non-material and symbolic wealth that can only be measured in approximative and highly volatile economic variables. It also only has value to those who believe in it – like all types of currency, for that matter. We aren’t the people who meet in Brussels and Davos. Nor do we want to be, really. We enjoy power up to the moderate point in which it entails responsibility, and that’s why real power never really needs to take us seriously. In other words, I probably occupy a rung in our social ladder just as far from both “the inner elite” and “the proles” as you do in your part of the world.*

*Your head looks a little too big for your thin body, and your face is neither particularly handsome nor ugly. Your skin is sallow in the winter, but quickly acquires a darker, tanned glow after a few weeks of “volunteer” work on rural farms in the summer sun. All North Koreans, apart from the inner elite, participate in these collective voluntary efforts at regular intervals. Your hair has been insidiously receding for as long as I’ve known you, and your bald spot is growing, and yet it remains as jet-black as a teenager’s, year after year. It took me a couple of visits before I began to notice the almost total absence of grey-haired people of any age.*

*Is the fountain of youth in North Korea? If not, your country must consume entire rivers of hair rinse every year. I’m not sure whether hair dye could be found to fall in under article 4, point 6 in the EU sanctions against North Korea:* Luxury perfumes, toilet waters and cosmetics, including beauty and make-up products. *If so, this is a golden opportunity for the international community to deliver a crushing blow where it really hurts![[21]](#footnote-21)*

*Your laughter sounds like gravel in a tin can – thick, wheezy gasps from deep down in your belly, indistinguishable from the opening salvos of a serious fit of smoker’s cough. Oddly enough, though, considering you’re rarely seen without a lit (strong, North Korean) cigarette, I’ve never heard you have any respiratory problems. Your windpipe cilia must have been scorched away years ago.*

*All in all, there is something of the classical anti-hero about you, both of the underdog we as an audience are supposed to cheer on against a superior force, and the small-time crook with a heart of gold. On the rare occasions when your expression is at rest, your face sometimes acquires a hint of melancholy. I wouldn’t say “sad clown”, but perhaps not entirely unlike a kind of younger, East Asian Harry Dean Stanton (trust me, you can live with the comparison to the guy). In your own words, you’re a fox, and I agree to a certain extent. A cross between a fox and a street cat.*

*The Ministry you work for is a central tool in North Korea’s modest attempts at soft power*, *and its main task is to stimulate cooperation with the outside world in a number of different areas, with an emphasis on culture in a broad sense. I suspect the Ministry would have preferred to focus full-time on sending North Korean performance artists such as acrobats, virtuoso musicians, gymnasts and other child prodigies to prestigious and preferably slightly old-fashioned and solemn culture festivals around the world. But of course you appreciate the need to signalise a certain openness the other way as well, especially considering your country’s dubious reputation. So on paper at least, the Ministry is interested in inviting culture workers to North Korea – NB! preferably world-famous and self-funding culture workers! – while developing long-term collaborations and contacts with artistic and cultural institutions abroad. That’s why you’re the people who handle most of North Korea’s contact with the likes of me – artists, researchers, athletes, journalists, businesspeople and international friendship associations.*

*The Ministry divides the outside world into several sections, each with their own areas of responsibility and little contact with each other: the European section, the North American section and so on. Each individual employee in a given section acts as a contact for a particular country or region. How do you go about distributing countries amongst yourselves, by the way? I keep forgetting to ask you. Is it first come, first served? Do you draw tickets from a hat at your Christmas party? “Damn! Bad luck, comrade Kang, Belarus two years in a row … but congratulations on France, comrade Paek!” Or is it more merit-based, with diligent workers being rewarded with Great Britain next year, while slackers are punished with Albania?*

*In any case, I never had the feeling you were particularly busy as the contact in charge of Norway (Scandinavia, too, for that matter) before I came along.*

*Which may have been precisely the idea. Maybe you put in an application for a quiet section yourself, or maybe your superiors thought Scandinavia would be a convenient place to “park” a potential nuisance like you – that rich, stable and not very troublesome, but also sanctimonious and dull part of the continent. Over these past few years, I’ve seen you snooze your way through enough concerts, performances and exhibitions – including those we’ve put together ourselves – to be able to safely conclude that you are monumentally uninterested in art and other forms of cultural expression. What motivates you is* making them happen, *often against seemingly impossible odds. There, too, we have quite a bit in common, even though I at least as a rule manage to stay awake during my own productions. You like people, partying and excitement and have nothing against disco balls. You were there when someone like me needed someone like you in exactly that position, another* nol sae – *a North Korean playboy.*

**SEX**

**(IN NORTH KOREA!)**

The strength of youth is that the more it is put to use, the more pumps out, like a well where water gushes forth with greater force the deeper one digs.

KIM JONG IL

**STRAIGHT**

A cherished household saying in all of Korea is *nam nam, buk nyo*: men from the south, women from the north. It refers to the partition of the country, which is implicitly a tragedy also because the most beautiful women live in the north and the most handsome men in the south. But for the time being at least, North Korean women and their lucky men have no reason to fear that immigrants from the south will come and steal their girlfriends. To them, a bench on the riverbank or the steps leading down to the Taedong River are among the capital’s most popular spots for a date. Couples in love behave very demurely in North Korea, and the boldest thing you’ll see are people holding hands. Making out in public is both unheard of and as yet unseen in North Korea. It is also unthinkable to bring your boyfriend or girlfriend back to your room, both because of cramped living arrangements and cultural reasons. Totalitarian systems are always puritanical and morally conservative. They know very well how unruly human sexuality can be, and therefore take a dark view of sex only for the sake of pleasure. As a consequence, the main reason there is little or no sex education in schools is probably ideological rather than cultural, because North Koreans aren’t a particularly prudish people in private. Nevertheless, most North Koreans, men and women alike, come to their wedding nights as virgins.

During a cigarette break outside the high-end Koryo Hotel, I once had the deep inner pleasure of overhearing a daredevil diplomat from the Malayan embassy giving his North Korean colleague a long and detailed improvised lecture on the joys and importance of giving your woman enough orgasms. The fastest route to success? “*You have to lick! Lick a lot! And suck! And move your tongue in small circles! Like this!”*, the enthusiastic Malaysian loudly instructed the stiffly smiling, steadily more petrified North Korean.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Contraception, in the sense of preventing as opposed to interrupting pregnancies, barely exists at all. It was a bit of a treat for Mr. Win the time I brought him a pack of condoms as a present from Norway, although I’m not absolutely certain he used all of them on his wife.

Sexual relations between North Koreans and foreigners are a taboo that is often joked about, but rarely if ever violated. To become a member of the “Pyongyang Club” of foreigners who have had sex in North Korea, you’ll simply have to plan ahead and bring your own buddy. This also applies to other sexual orientations, of course. For example:

**GAY**

Like in any other country and culture, it is safe to assume that homosexual boys and girls are born in North Korea every single day. Unfortunately, few or no members of this already small minority will ever have the chance to live out their true sexuality within the country’s borders. Most gay men and women you’ll run into in North Korea – and statistically, you’re almost bound to – are married with children. Your guides will innocently claim that homosexuality simply doesn’t exist in North Korea. From this logic, it follows that the country neither needs legislation to protect the rights of LGBT people (like we’re so good at in Scandinavia), nor to protect society from them (like they’re so good at in a number of other places, such as Russia and most Muslim countries). In fact, since North Korea remains largely unexposed to globalisation and the flow of information, very few people in the general public are actually even aware of the phenomenon of homosexuality. This most likely includes homosexual themselves, who lack a system of concepts, keys to understanding their own feelings and a language to describe them to like-minded people. In spite of this, there are hardly grounds to characterise North Korean culture as particularly homophobic. Descriptions given by refugees of everyday life in their hometowns paint a picture of a relatively relaxed mentality, at least when it comes to the few people mentioned who openly diverge from sexual norms. I’ve heard stories, for example, of local “cross-dressers” in rural districts and “life partners” who live together in old age. Not to mention the country’s big[[23]](#footnote-23) standing[[24]](#footnote-24) army. Sexuality is like water. It changes its course but can’t be stopped, and it goes without saying that up to ten years of compulsory military service in remote garrisons has to lead to a number of men having sex of one form or another with other men at some point. Also, the aesthetics of North Korea’s official propaganda are much more camp than they are aware of themselves (one would think). In fact, fans of the two main currents of gay subculture will find much to delight them in North Korea. Those with a predilection for camp will love the shameless, operetta-like sentimentality that pervades most forms of artistic expression, the many-coloured tulle of the women’s *jogori* and the enormous quantities of colourful kitsch adorning all official festivities. Likewise, the large number of men in uniforms, and the kind of muscular socialism associated with typical celebrations of male physical prowess in all manner of official propaganda, will appeal to those who prefer *muscle Mary.* Much of North Korea’s propaganda art, with its broad-shouldered and muscle-bound heroes of work and war, is only a few items of clothing away from an Asian Tom of Finland. As a gay tourist, in any case, you’re virtually guaranteed not to experience discrimination as long as you don’t provoke on purpose. Even striking a pose in the middle of Kim Il Sung Square and singing “I Will Survive”in a feather boa and leopard thongs is more likely to inspire amazement than violence. (I should add that I haven’t tried.) But the rules are the same for everyone, and if you want to get laid in North Korea, it will have to be with another foreigner.

That doesn’t necessarily mean giving up on it altogether. As an extra service to my merry and libidinous readers, here’s a quick little guide-within-the-guide, specially written for the occasion by my friend, collaborator and expert on the subject, the Frenchman Jean Valnoir.[[25]](#footnote-25) Mesdames et messieurs:

**THE MASTURBATOR’S GUIDE TO PYONGYANG**

“North Korea is a country that offers few sources of entertainment beyond drinking, karaoke and using live chickens as target practice.[[26]](#footnote-26) It is difficult, not to say impossible, to initiate intimate affairs with the local population. For this reason, visitors travelling without a better half who would like to flesh out their sensuous daydreams are left with no other options than self-satisfaction. Pornography, which many people appreciate and might even need in order to do the deed, is strictly forbidden, and we therefore strongly recommend that you take certain precautions if you really want to introduce subversive smut into the paradise of the proletariat. The customs officials checking your baggage upon entry are, like most North Koreans, not very computer savvy. They’re primarily interested in larger objects like DVDs and CDs, and won’t even notice an inconspicuous little memory stick tucked into a side pocket of your shoulder bag or backpack. So stick to digital solutions! A visitor’s laptop will often only receive cursory inspection, since customs officers neither have the time nor the expertise to check the whole hard disk on all of the computers people bring in to the country these days. They’ll settle for a file or two from a folder they’re happy to let you choose yourself (you might want to prepare a folder called “VIDEO”, for instance). We nevertheless recommend that you store your “artistic” video files on a slightly inaccessible part of the hard disk. Save the material in a .zip-file and give the file extension a “new name”, for example .doc, .xml, .psd and the like. Then save it in a folder where it will be camouflaged among real files with the chosen file extension. The most cautious among you might additionally want to use encryption software such as TrueCrypt, Veracrypt or the (less secure) Bitlocker, which apparently make selected files invisible on your hard disk. Where in North Korea can or should one abandon oneself to the dirty joys of individualism? Well, different strokes to different folks, so it’s really a matter of individual discretion when one feels the need or is in the right mood to indulge in a bit of “self-service”. I’d nevertheless like to remind you that in a state ruled with an iron fist, not to mention an iron *grip*, like North Korea, the price to pay for public masturbation is very high, especially if you’re doing it in front of a smart phone with (say) a full-blown “interracial orgy” playing on the screen. For this reason, make it a priority to find a place that is as private as possible, like your own bedroom, if you’re lucky enough not to be sharing one with a fellow traveller. Even then, however, the regime will still be able to reach you, in spite of precautions such as bed linen draped over your knees like a flapping tent: During my third visit to the country, on September 3, 2017, to be precise, I was interrupted in my third wank of the day when the bed suddenly began to vibrate. This earthquake turned out to have been caused by the biggest nuclear testing the regime had carried out until then, just a few hundred kilometres away from my hotel room in Pyongyang.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**USEFUL ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

The first few years after North Korea began providing a 3G mobile network (for tourists and foreigners only) there were no restrictions or censorship on Internet access, probably because the authorities didn’t have an overview of what was available yet. At the time, you could easily (if discretely) visit YouPorn in the middle of Kim Il Sung Square – we’ve tried! This golden age was short-lived, however, and today most porn sites are blocked, as are YouTube, Facebook and other social media.

Don’t worry: The persistent rumours that all North Korean hotel rooms have CCTV surveillance are almost certainly untrue. In the unlikely event that they are true, the surveillance teams would undoubtedly have to endure quite a bit of footage of people masturbating (mostly men, I would imagine). It is also important to underline that even though North Korea has been the target of many different forms of sanctions, these do not include paper tissues and napkins, which are readily available in most of the shops you’re allowed to visit in Pyongyang, and whose softness and absorption capacity leave nothing to be desired by Western standards.[[28]](#footnote-28)”

RECIPE:

**TANGOGI SOUP**

Although the available sexual repertoire is somewhat limited in North Korea, at least you can *eat* doggy-style. Like many other East Asian countries, Korea has plenty of dishes that are allegedly “good for married life”. Dog meat is a traditional and popular ingredient all over the peninsula. Directly translated, *tan gogi* means “sweet meat”, presumably to sound more appetising, but perhaps also to allude to the meat’s slightly gamey and sweet flavour. In South Korea a similar dish is called *gaejangguk* (dog soup, quite simply) or *bosintang* (health soup). It’s a nutritious and fortifying soup on the whole, and word has it that dog meat also has aphrodisiac qualities, especially for men. The more tender the meat, the better and longer the night. Or as the Cooks Association puts it, a bit more indirectly:

“Tangogi Soup is renowned for its hearty, nutritious, and easily digestible qualities. It is said that Tangogi soup is so nourishing that even a single drop of this health tonic contains tremendous benefits.”

Proceed with caution, in other words!

INGREDIENTS

**TANGOGI SOULP**

5kg dog meat with bone

50g finely chopped chives

50g pressed garlic

2 tbs salt

1 ½ tbs chili powder (*gochugaru*)

2 ts black pepper

SPICY PASTA

4 cloves of pressed garlic

3 tbs finely chopped chives

3 tbs finely chopped spring onions

2 tbs chili powder

3 tbs *DOENJANG* (fermented soya bean pasta) or *GOCHUJANG* CHILI PASTA

1 ½ tbs chopped Korean mint (*Agastache rugosa*)

2 tbs finely chopped coriander

4 tbs perilla seeds *(Perilla frutescens)*

Chopped spring onion, chopped garlic and pepper to serve

**HOW TO MAKE IT**

1. Remove organs and trim fat from the meat, set aside, then rinse meat with cold water to wash away blood and debris. Place meat in pot, bring water to a boil, then simmer for 3 hours while skimming off fat and scum, being sure to save the fat for the seasoning paste that will come later.
2. The meat should now be tender. Remove it from the broth and separate the bones and skin from the meat. Put the skin and a small portion of the meat aside to use in the seasoning paste. Tear remaining meat into thick strips, chop the organs to a desired size, then toss with chopped green onion, garlic, salt, ground red pepper, and ground black pepper.
3. To make the seasoning paste: mince the skin and the meat that was put aside earlier. In a sauce pan, combine the chopped fat pieces with minced garlic, chopped green onion and Chinese chive, ground red chili pepper, the skimmed fat, salt, and a splash of the meat broth. Bring everything to a boil until it becomes a rich paste.
4. Put the seasoned strips of meat and organs pieces into the broth and add fermented soybean paste to taste. Bring everything to a boil, skimming off any scum, then add chopped green onion, minced garlic, and ground black pepper as desired.
5. Place a portion of the meat into a preheated bowl, then pour in the boiling hot broth. Garnish with finely chopped cilantro and hyssop, a scoop of the seasoning paste, and sprinkle with perilla seeds. Serve hot.

Although different varieties of dog meat are well known all over the Korean Peninsula, North Korean guides will rarely on their own initiative suggest a visit to a restaurant that serves the long-established dish. This may be because the custom is said to have emerged at a time when poor Koreans ate dog’s meat out of sheer necessity. But who knows – perhaps they’re just afraid to overfeed us already decadent and frivolous westerners with nature’s own Viagra? Our limited opportunities to find an outlet for the effect (see the section above on sex in North Korea) would probably make the consequences both enormously impractical and perhaps even risky.

A good friend in a Western-run travel agency told me the story of the hard time he once had completing the whole several hour long and strictly solemn round tour of the Kumsusan Mausoleum, including defiling past the two leaders’ embalmed bodies, with a throbbing and unyielding erection. Knowing him, dog soup wasn’t necessarily to blame, but when he confided in a (Western) colleague who had been on the same guided tour, the answer he received was an amused and incredulous: “What?! You too …?”

Of course, decadent bourgeois imperialists like us aren’t the only ones who sometimes feel the call of overpowering animal urges. One example is an episode that somehow encompasses several of the above-mentioned categories of sexual orientation and perhaps a few more. Its protagonist is our merry driver, the dirty little bugger Mr. Han.

For most overland trips in North Korea, we foreigners travel in a minibus with our own driver connected to the host organisation. The driver remains at our disposal throughout our stay. Driving foreign delegations and groups of tourists is a profession in its own right in North Korea. As a rule, the drivers are friendly, quiet and unassuming middle-aged men who don’t speak a word of any foreign language and who barely interact with the rest of the group. On this particular trip, however, with a news team I’d brought along from a Norwegian TV station, we had a new man behind the wheel who soon turned out to be somewhat out of the ordinary as North Korean chauffeurs go. Mr. Han was a true *nong taegi[[29]](#footnote-29)* at heart, straddle-legged, carefree, friendly and refreshingly free of modesty and other signs of social antennae. There was something at once straightforwardly rustic and self-confident about the man that made us think that if he had been an American, he would have come from somewhere in the South.

Our travel party – all men – hit it off with Mr. Han from the start and often exchanged manly pats on the back and firm handshakes when the situation called for it. Often it was Mr. Han who took the initiative. Then one day, on short notice, we got wind of a welcoming parade for the national table tennis team, who had just landed in Pyongyang after beating their rivals from the South in the World Championship final. We had to move fast, and our group hurried into the minibus to let Mr. Han drive us to the parade on the other side of town. He hadn’t turned on the engine yet when our cameraman, Truls, who was standing in the aisle, leaned over to dig out a particular lens from his big bag of equipment. Truls, who happens to be slim and in good shape, stood stooped at an angle that made his T-shirt slip up and uncover a pinkish-white lower back, a pair of modest love handles and a hint of plumber’s crack.

For a long while, Mr. Han gazed at the bared hind parts of the deeply concentrated Truls, who still hadn’t found the lens he was looking for. Then Mr. Han leaned forward, grabbed hold of Truls’ little folds of side belly fat on both sides and began squeezing them, approvingly and sensuously, with the expression of a pig farmer who has just made a real bargain. It didn’t bother Mr. Han a bit that there were four other wide-eyed adult men around them within a two square meter radius. (Perhaps quite the contrary, for all we know.) Truls, who like many cameramen has the gift of near-autistic tunnel vision, continued to rummage around for his lens, giving Mr. Han free rein for a feast of pinching, fondling and slapping that lasted for several minutes.

The whole thing was beginning to look more and more like the first rounds of the classic rape scene in the movie *Deliverance* (“squeal like a pig!”).[[30]](#footnote-30) But there wasn’t a hint of maliciousness in Mr. Han’s expression, just pure, childlike joy. Eventually – presumably to his relief – Truls managed to dig out the lens he was looking for, the bus could drive off and that was it (at least for the rest of us).

After this unforgettable experience, our group of travelling companions appointed the blithely unsuspecting Mr. Han to unwitting honorary member of the newly-established Pyongyang chapter of the Norwegian Bear Club.[[31]](#footnote-31)

There wouldn’t, however, be many more opportunities for him to pig out on white belly fat after this visit – but not because of his proclivities. It turned out he drove like a pig, so badly that it proved too much even for our North Korean hosts, who were used to bumping around on bad roads – which you’ll find there are quite a bit of when you’re travelling around the country by bus.

OUTSKIRTS:

**THE REST OF THE COUNTRY**

Wherever the Motherland is, there is also our Party, our government, our socialist system and the happy lives of our people.

KIM JONG UN

Saddled with exaggerations from both our own media at home and the North Koreans’ state propaganda – in many ways a co-dependent relationship – it’s easy to buy into the idea of the country as a miniature superpower with the will and the capacity to conquer *lebensraum*. But if you haven’t already made up your mind in advance, period, it won’t take you many days to realise that the terrain doesn’t quite match any of these maps. No more than a fifteen-minute minibus drive from the Kim Il Sung Square of military parades and mass demonstrations – the very heart of North Korea, both as a country and an idea – you’ll find goats wandering the streets and whole villages doing their laundry in river pools throughout the winter. On the roads or in the fields on the way from Pyongyang to the third largest city, Kaesong, a three to four-hour trip, there’s barely another motor vehicle to be seen.

And this Third World nation, hanging on for dear life to what only at a stretch can be said to resemble a society from the second half of the 20th century, is supposed to be a threat to world peace? No-one will be more pleased than the generals in Pyongyang if we visitors from faraway lands bring this idea back to our homes.

Many impressions from North Korea are acquired on the move, through the window of the minibus or tourist bus that will be your mobile home during your stay. People and fields rush by and disappear out there in the distance. High-rise buildings rear up on the horizon, and you’ll never see the people by the roadside again, not to mention learn anything about them. The vast majority of “tourist snapshots from North Korea” are taken from a distance and a shaky base and are out of focus, useless and mysterious.

Why aren’t North Korean roads in better condition, by the way? The obvious answer is that the North Korean regime will always give control higher priority than living standards if it has to choose. Limiting the population’s mobility, and hence unpredictability, has always been more important than developing the infrastructure that is the lifeblood of a societal organism. Over the past ten years, North Korea has opened itself to the outside world to a remarkable degree after its own modest standards, and yet most of the country still remains as inaccessible to tourists as it is to North Koreans themselves.

If we imagine a map in which the areas and traffic arteries tourists have access to are shaded, the relationship between the open areas and the rest of the map would look like an image of veins on a large leaf. The vein network follows the few driveable main roads connecting the biggest cities in central and southern DPRK, the capital Pyongyang, Kaesong, Wonsan and Nampo. Along the northern border and the rivers marking the frontier with China, lie the extremities, Sinuiju in the northwest and Rason in the northeast, respectively, with a branch slightly west of the middle leading up to the state’s sacred mountain, Paektusan. The impression of having a lot to hide is something the North Korean government apparatus has created itself, which of course only makes us more curious. More often than not, it is the result of a knee-jerk and completely unwarranted secretiveness on the part of the North Koreans. The expectation we bring with us of North Korea as one big façade, a Truman Show concealing the “real” truth and a “real and authentic” world behind the scenes, just beyond our reach, turns practically everything we see around us into a potential scoop:

There’s bound to be something really sensational behind that hilltop over there, don’t you think? Or what about in that courtyard? Or that village in the distance? Here’s the answer. Are you ready?

Drum roll: … Well … probably not, I’m afraid.

Usually there are just people there, with their spartan, toilsome, grey and above all monotonous and uneventful North Korean daily lives: boredom with a manageable element of dull, low-intensity fear, not unlike life in the old Eastern Bloc.

“But are you allowed to meet ordinary people?” is a common question. The wording contains an underlying premise that in turn derives from one of the most common (and not the least bit unfounded) perceptions of North Korea: that as a visitor, you’re being so closely watched by your guides/minders that you only get to talk to specially selected representatives of an unspecified elite. Like so much else in North Korea, there’s a kernel of truth to this, but you’ll find that it’s wrapped up in further, thick layers of exaggeration – because who exactly are ordinary people?

The answer to the question has to be another resounding *Well ...* First let us ask ourselves: How many “ordinary people”, meaning people who *aren’t* employed in one form of service function or another, like waiters, tourist guides, hotel staff, tuktuk drivers, masseurs, prostitutes and beggars do you meet and “get to talk to” as a tourist in any country you visit around the world?

And if you do talk to them, what do you talk about? Even a majority of globetrotting young backpackers mainly stick to other backpackers on their travels. Another important fact that may be a bit too close to the tip of the nose to be able to see it at once, is that the vast majority of people who visit North Korea as tourists are doing it for the first and only time. As a tourist following an extensive and generally strictly scheduled travel program, you rarely get the chance to relate to people beyond the two or three English-speaking guides/interpreters/minders and so on from a state tourist agency accompanying the group throughout your stay. You’ll additionally have some contact with the guides (usually only Korean-speaking) who work at specific museums, monuments and attractions. To them, praise of the leadership is part of their job description, whether they’re working as full-time guides or have been handpicked for the occasion, for example to represent their workplace, a factory, a collective farm or the like.

What might feel like a week on the inside of the world’s biggest brainwashed cult to you, is a job to them that lasts exactly as long as it takes to give you and other tourists a tour of the sights they’ve been assigned to. For complete strangers like us, “speaking freely” with people who live under system of government as controlled and authoritarian as the North Korean, is the same phenomenon the travel writer P.J. O’Rourke aptly described as “an opinion poll taken in a country where it [is] illegal to hold certain opinions”:

*Hello, Mr. Peasant, I’m an inquisitive and frightening stranger. God knows who I work for. Would you care to ostensibly support the dictatorship that controls every facet of your existence, or shall we put you down as in favor of the UNO opposition and just tear up your ration card right here and now? [[32]](#footnote-32)*

Humanity is endlessly diverse, also within each country, group of people, language and distinct cultures, and a roofer from Colchester may have more in common with a Mongolian colleague than with an academic from Cambridge. In that respect, Mr. Win and I, too, are not especially different from each other as members of our respective “outer elites”.

Mr. Win is one of few North Korean men who haven’t done their seven-year military service, which is something he at times can seem slightly ashamed of. “Too bad he was too smart for the army,” his superiors half-joke. Instead he was selected to study foreign languages at Kim Il Sung University, which is tantamount in North Korea to a waiting career in diplomacy, or similar jobs involving extensive contact with the outside world. Given the current level of his English, I suspect he didn’t exactly graduate at the top of his class. Unfortunately, but understandably, someone “up there” must have decided that he was a bit too scruffy around the edges for the well-groomed and potty-trained foreign diplomatic corps. The job he has now, therefore, is in many ways a well-calibrated compromise between the man he actually is and the privileges he has a right to according to the unspoken North Korean rank order. Mr. Win, of course, has an impeccable family background, since his late father was a high-ranking officer in the People’s Army.

Many of his colleagues in the Ministry have similar backgrounds. They are the children of officers, embassy secretaries and party officials, in other words the upper or middle layers of Orwell’s outer elite, securely anchored within what the North Korean state’s own unspoken caste system defines as “the loyal class”. It is them and people like them we foreigners deal with, almost no matter what business we have visiting North Korea, not the super-corrupt and overprivileged state mafiosos. Our guides are loyal drudges with a standard of living comparable to that of a Norwegian primary school teacher. The state in its wisdom gives them *just a bit more than enough* privileges to make their drudgery worthwhile: potentially profitable contacts with foreigners, occasional trips abroad in connection with cultural exchanges, and access to a handful of hard currency from time to time. In a brief, frozen moment of self-insight, it strikes me again that this isn’t entirely unlike the life of a state-funded Norwegian artist …

A trip to North Korea from the outside world is like a time machine, but like in many other developing countries, you can travel between epochs just by moving around inside a city: Pyongyang has small pockets of here and now, slightly bigger pockets of the nineties, even bigger areas of the eighties and huge areas stuck in the fifties and sixties. Outside the city, you’re back in the thirties and even earlier in a matter of minutes.

There is, however, one big and important difference between North Korea and most other developing countries, because North Korea has actually *fallen out of* the modern world the country once used to keep up with and even belong to as a matter of course:

**CLOUD CUCKOO LAND**

(MORTEN THE FIRST)

The Motherland is the true mother of all human beings and the cradle of life and happiness.

KIM JONG IL

1977. A tall, probably slightly stiff and jet-lagged Norwegian in a dark velour suit with flared trousers – very hip at the time – steps out into the twilight over Sunan International Airport about twenty miles west of the North Korean capital. The Soviet-built Air Koryo plane has just landed after an eight-hour flight from Moscow. As a young election campaign secretary to a Norwegian Socialist Left Party struggling ahead of the autumn’s upcoming parliamentary election, Morten Jørgensen isn’t exactly unhappy about this exotic break from the daily grind back home. Over the next few days, he and hundreds of other more or less prominent politicians and left-wing activists from all over the world will be participating in the big international Juche conference dedicated to the Great Leader Kim Il Sung’s words and teachings.

His neck-length, straw-blonde hair, which along with the trendy clothes and general informal attitude may perhaps hint to his future career, shimmers in the flashlight from the North Korean party photographers’ cameras. Rows of schoolgirls in Korean national costumes with beaming, if perhaps slightly stiff smiles, hand over flowers packed in rustling cellophane to him and the other guests. He isn’t the only Norwegian – or member of the Socialist Left Party (SV) – to have received (or given) flowers in North Korea over the years, but he is one of the few who has shaken the hand of the Great Leader:[[33]](#footnote-33)

“During the election campaign, SV was invited to attend an international conference in Pyongyang dedicated to the theme – roughly speaking – of “Kim Il Sung’s thought”. Our party leadership, particularly Berge Furre and Hanna Kvanmo, thought it would be unfortunate, to put it mildly, if we made newspaper headlines about an SV visit to Pyongyang, the feared and fabled communist dictatorship. At a meeting of the party’s central committee, they agreed to try to minimise the risk of unwanted publicity. This meant that SV couldn’t send a party celebrity. Then someone had a bright idea, and looked at me: ‘How about you, Morten, wouldn’t you like to go?’ And I said YES!

“There were legendary rumours going around on the Left about these kind of trips to Korea. Of course I wanted to go.

“I saw it as an experience and an adventure. The head of the delegation was Steinar Stjernø, a professor and former president of the University College of Oslo who was SV’s deputy chairman at the time. He was the anonymous figure in SV’s top leadership, an unassuming man. But the point was having the right title, because the Koreans really cared about titles! I was given the title *General Secretary of the Election Campaign*, which would do just fine together with Steinar’s title, *Member of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the Socialist Left Party Norway.* And this meant that Dagbladet and VG wouldn’t be getting their headlines, since we were just two party officials going off on a trip.

“I remember Hanna Kvanmo in particular breathing a sigh of relief. The general feeling was that to decline the invitation would be to bow to the press and public opinion. There was also this sense that the few “squeezed-in” countries like Cuba and North Korea needed a bit of support. And although the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea may have been unsavoury, at least these countries were trying to fight capitalism. The idea was that at the end of the day, it would make things far too complicated if SV were to begin screening the countries it approved of. So we decided to maintain contacts with everyone. There were also a number of participants at the conference SV had a big interest in meeting. Among others, we met a representative of MIR, the revolutionary party from Chile under the military dictatorship. There were also representatives from the PLO and several African liberation movements, as well as heads of state and other leaders from a number of African countries, people at the ministerial level. This was no crackpot conference in that respect, but most of the people attending came from developing nations. At the time, North Korea had a very good relationship with many African countries. In fact, they were even contributing development aid. They preferred to trade with independent nations, not with Europe. Steinar and I were the Norwegian delegation. We mostly hung out with the Danish delegation, which consisted of a union official and the author Arne Herløv Peterson, who won *Ekstrabladet*’s competition for the best erotic novel sometime in the 1970s. Amusing man.

“The actual conference lasted for three or four days and was held in a big hall in a gigantic Party palace. In the seats at the back there were maybe 1000 Korean party officials. The conference delegates, that is to say representatives from about a hundred countries, were seated up front. We’d been accommodated in a hotel with silk sheets and goldfish in the garden, our own personal waiter, a private chauffeur and Swedish Volvos the Koreans apparently never paid for. There was hardly any traffic on the roads, mostly bicycles, carts and military vehicles, plus farm machinery and lorries. There weren’t any private cars in North Korea, only party cars. Steinar had his own limo, but my driver took another route. He had figured out how to keep me happy, and there was nobody giving him orders to the contrary. Driving around like that, you get a sense of what the country looks like. Children and old timers waved as we drove by, people smiled and stopped in their tracks. Some of the kids saluted in their school uniforms. I never got the impression that they were thinking: ‘Here come the party bosses, we’d better wave.’ When I waved back, they were all thrilled. They went crazy. The limos were more like king Olav greeting the crowds than a tyrant. It was unexpected. I’d been on holiday in Yugoslavia before I was sent to North Korea, we’d been in Russia, too, and in both countries I was stopped by police or soldiers with machine guns – in the Soviet Union, for jaywalking at a red light! Practically everyone I saw trudging along the streets of Moscow looked unhappy and miserable. I only got to see North Korea the way it was in 1977, before Kim Il Sung died. At the time, North Koreans were well off materially compared to most of the neighbouring countries: free healthcare, free schooling and kindergartens, and after-school recreational structures that were literally as huge as castles.

“**Mangyongdae Schoolchildren’s Palace** in Pyongyang is a gigantic after-school recreational centre with lots of different activities. The kids marched around the streets in their red, white and blue school uniforms and sang happily at the top of their lungs, without teachers. I saw no signs of malnutrition, and there were kids doing sports all over the place. Both Pyongyang and Kaesong were tidy and clean. The whole country looked so clean you could have licked the streets. The Norwegian spirit of voluntary communal work is nothing compared to the North Korean zeal. The average North Korean is almost manic about good citizenship. On the other hand, there weren’t exactly ideal conditions for materialism: Pyongyang only had one shopping centre, with a selection of maybe 100 products, but they were enormously proud of the building itself.

*Did they show you around in North Korea or were you only at the conference?* people asked us when we got home. No, we travelled all over the place and saw factories, farms, theatres, concert halls and opera houses. We also visited kindergartens and these enormous after-school centres. Kim Il Sung’s death and the fall of the Berlin Wall are a watershed in North Korean history. The two phenomena coincide in form, if not in time. I barely recognise the country you see on TV these days. It looks like East Berlin or Moscow in 1977. Back then it didn’t. When I was in North Korea, the whole country was like a summer camp for born-again Christians. People were so happy it was crazy. I have no opinion about what things are like in North Korea now. I’ve seen quite a few videos that aren’t very nice.”

Thirty years and one Fall of Man later, after a national mourning, the advent of a new leader, a couple of natural catastrophes, a system collapse and a famine, the born-again summer camp would in some places look more like the post-apocalyptic societies of films such as *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes, The Road* and *Stalker*, full of greasy-haired survivors, clothes that never get properly clean, electricity from home-made aggregates, bad teeth, and a combination of longing for the past and shame for the present. Large parts of North Korea are the ruins of a utopia that only survives in a more or less intact, if museum-like and embalmed form, in Pyongyang and certain urban areas such as Kaesong and Wonsan. It is a Lilliputian country of 23 million inhabitants waging a cold war with most of the rest of the world. Half a century after the first half of the match against what was then and still is the world’s only superpower, it holds the US at bay with a score of 1-1 at half time.

A similarly defiant, politically incorrect and often self-reinforcing Asterix mentality also exists in our part of the world, for example in Israel, where a long, bloody history and the threat from bigger, hostile neighbours dictates most of the country’s foreign policy … At least it’s easy to think in those terms while you’re rattling south from Pyongyang on Reunification Highway in a Japanese minibus from the seventies. The road is four lanes wide and straight as a ruler. It points straight south, towards South Korea’s capital Seoul and that distant goal in the future, the day when the landmines can be cleared and the border opened. It’s also almost completely deserted. During the three hours it takes to travel south to **the demilitarised zone (DMZ)**, the oncoming traffic consists of a few goats by the roadside and perhaps a battered Chinese military lorry or two, their flatbeds loaded with farmers and soldiers on their way from one construction site or ditch-digging project to another. At the symbolic frontier post **Panjumon**, a people divided into two armies literally stand nose to nose on either side of a 20 centimetre broad and perhaps 10 centimetre high concrete threshold, trying to stare each other down.

Elsewhere, it is way out at the outer edges, close to the border with China and Russia, that contact with the outside world is more extensive and the signs of modernity are spreading. Beyond the big cities and the main thoroughfares of Pyongyang-Kaesong-Wonsan, much of the extremely basic transport you’ll see on the roads are old Chines lorries with wooden flatbeds and wood firing (the same patent used for kindling-fired vehicles in Norway during World War II).

Deforested mountainsides and endless, barren fields are scenery you’ll see a lot of through your bus or train window. The almost deserted landscape bolsters our notions of “the mysterious”, “the world behind the scenes” and “an empty stage”. The North Korean landscape is structured in keeping with the socialist planned economy, unlike other South East Asian countries like Cambodia, where the rural districts are largely a patchwork of little smallholdings with strips of farmland that are often no bigger than a kitchen garden. North Korea consists of endless plains of single crops yielding whatever produce someone has decided should be cultivated there: maize, rice, apples. All of the villages are located deep inside these vast fieldscapes, and since so few people can get around in other ways than on foot, nor any reason or opportunity, for that matter, to leave their daily spheres, we rarely see them in large numbers along the highways.

The soil is reddish and sandy. This is soil that was never suited for high-intensity agriculture in the first place. It is exhausted. Rich, fine, black topsoil – mould – is a rare thing in North Korea, where almost 80 percent of the country consists of mountain ranges and other forms of rugged terrain. Not unlike us Norwegians, the North Koreans are proud of their mountains. They resonate in the national soul: like a last bastion against foreign armies, peaks beckoning in the blue distance, like the distance between lovers, like silent guardians of dark secrets, prison camps and nuclear testing sites.

On our expeditions through nine out of twelve North Korean provinces, in the shadows of a hundred mountains, I have again and again sensed this wounded, defiant pride in my Korean travelling companions – pride in a history, a landscape and a leadership with so densely entwined bonds of destiny that the only way to divide them may be to sever them altogether.

**THE POWER LINES OF HISTORY, I:**

**KIM THE FIRST**

**Juche 1 (1912) – Juche 83 (1994)**

Our country is a shrimp crushed between fighting whales.

OLD PAN-KOREAN SAYING

One of the many big contradictions of North Korea is that the state propaganda energetically and loudly trumpets the country’s sovereignty, independence and self-sufficiency, even though (or perhaps because) the country’s history from the late Middle Ages onwards actually attests to the exact opposite. Korea has always been at the mercy of its bigger and more powerful neighbours in the region, whether they are allies or occupiers. This may be the reason for all of the intensely overcompensating self-glorification going on – Korea has always been the shrimp among whales.

The 20th century was still in its infancy when an earthquake broke out in world politics in the form of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. The bone of contention was the dominion over precisely the weak and inwards-looking Korean empire, which for centuries had been mainly under Chinese influence, as well as strategically important marine bases in the neighbouring Chinese region of Manchuria. The conflict ended the following year in an unprecedented defeat for a white European superpower against the Asian upstart Japan. This is considered the first great conflict of the century. Tsar Nicholas II was forced to accept a humiliating peace settlement, which amongst other things made Korea a Japanese “protectorate” or dependency. Five years later, in 1910, Korea was formally annexed into the Japanese empire and thereby ceased to exist as an independent state. The 40-year occupation did not come to an end until Japan capitulated to the Allied powers in 1945. It is a painful and contentious era in the Korean national consciousness.

In today’s North Korea, this era forms the bedrock of a cult of personality and a national mythology of heroic resistance, a mythology that has only become stronger and more entrenched over the past three generations. Seeing as the Leader is all but equivalent to the country in the ubiquitous state propaganda, the two stories are so tightly interwoven that it is impossible to tell one without telling the other:

The Great Leader Kim Il Sung will always be with us!

NORTH KOREAN SLOGAN

**1912-1945: THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION**

North Korea’s godfather in every sense of the word was born on April 15, 1912, as Kim Song Ju[[34]](#footnote-34), in the village of Chilgol near the town of Mangyongdae just outside Pyongyang. It is unlikely that the worldwide news sensation of the sinking of the Titanic that same day would have reached Chilgol and the rest of Korean society. Kim Il Sung’s grandparents’ house in Mangyongdae, where he spent several years of his childhood, has since been canonised as his birthplace by the North Korean state propaganda. Today it is a national monument, an open-air museum and the country’s most important place of pilgrimage aside from the awe-inspiring mausoleum **Kumsusan Palace of the Sun**, where Kim Il Sung sleeps the sleep of the eternal president in his glass case (self-portrait with disco ball: permitted, but only in front of the building, never in the inner sanctum). In 2012, he has also had his own son, the eternal chairman of the Worker’s Party of Korea (WPK), Kim Jong Il, as his closest neighbour.

At the beginning of the 1900s, the country was an isolated, preindustrial and socially highly conservative society. It was held together by a strict class system in which large parts of the population were serfs at the mercy of a corrupt nobility (*yangban*) under a weak and uninterested emperor. For the great majority of people, it probably made very little difference to everyday life whether they were being exploited by a Korean squire or a Japanese colonial official, or ignored by a Korean emperor or a Japanese governor.

To back up the story of a young Korean patriot who struggled against the odds to rise from humble circumstances, the North Korean state mythology and Kim’s own comprehensive and best-selling memoirs[[35]](#footnote-35) put a lot of emphasis on how dirt-poor his family was.[[36]](#footnote-36) This is of course an exaggeration. The Kim family was far from wealthy, but can rather be called lower middle class in a society where the great majority of the population were subsistence farmers, many in addition serfs. Song Ju’s father was a teacher and his mother the daughter of a headmaster. One important aspect of his family background you won’t find much mention of in North Korean history books, is religion: both of Kim’s parents and his extended family on both sides where active Christians. Evangelical Americans were among those who had made a big impact especially in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, indeed to the extent that Pyongyang was often referred to as “Korea’s Jerusalem”. Song Ju himself was reportedly an eager churchgoer, in fact even an organist until the end of his teens. One of Kim’s greatest role models, Joseph Stalin, studied to be a priest in his youth and also based his own, formally atheist state system on a clearly religiously inspired form of idolatry and saint worship.

In his memoirs, the ageing Kim Il Sung attempts to play down his Christian background. He justifies his parents’ strong religious devotion with the claim that it was a cover for underground work against the Japanese colonialists. This isn’t necessarily unfounded. The Japanese were highly suspicious of Christians and considered them corrupted by Western ideas. It’s therefore quite natural that the line dividing Christian and nationalist Koreans could often be blurred.

Nor is there much reason to doubt that the Kim family was strongly opposed to the Japanese occupation and correspondingly in favour of Korean independence. Both Kim’s father and two of his uncles were at different times jailed by the Japanese for activities supporting national independence.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the Japanese presided over a far-reaching modernisation of Korea. Roads and factories were built, industries established, ports and mines constructed. Modern agricultural methods were introduced, and the children of the Korean elite – which was no longer limited to the nobility – were sent off to Tokyo and other Japanese cities to get their higher education. The mountainous northern part of Korea was rich in minerals, coal and other valuable natural resources. It was mainly in this part of the country that modernisation took place, and it was here most of the industry was established. Southern Korea, with few natural resources beyond good conditions for rice planting, remained a rural backwater, with the exception of the capital, Seoul.

This uneven distribution of resources and wealth between the two Koreas would continue to be skewed in favour of the North for several decades, throughout the Korean War and reconstruction in its aftermath, until the beginning of the 1970s.

Like in any relationship between colony and colonial power, population groups were exchanged between the countries. Under a government apparatus dominated by Japanese colonial officials and their Korean subordinates, a substantial immigration of Japanese settlers to Korea took place. At the same time, emigration the other way, of poor Koreans seeking their fortunes in big Japanese cities, was at least as substantial. Today, ethnically homogenous Japan’s decidedly biggest minority is Korean (called *zainichi,* which means “residing” in Japanese). They are the descendants of the immigrants and slave labourers of colonial times. A considerable portion of them are still organised in the North Korea-friendly special interest group *Chongryon* (also called Chosen Soren).

In any case, most Koreans both in the north and the south agree on the fact that the Japanese occupation was characterised by discrimination, racism and oppression of the Korean population, regardless of the technological advances it brought on. Sporadic revolts were put down by all available means. Small groups of Korean guerrillas were efficiently defeated and neutralised by the occupants, so much so that most Korean resistance movements had to flee over the border to the vast and sparsely populated region of Manchuria on the Chinese side of the border, where many joined Mao’s guerrilla army.

As Japan evolved throughout the 1920s and 1930s into a steadily more aggressive military fascist regime – a label often applied to today’s North Korea – the idea of the superiority of the Japanese race became more and more predominant, also in practice. Occupying Korea as a territory was no longer enough. Now Korean *culture*, too, was to be assimilated by the “superior” Japanese culture. The degree of oppression was much higher than for example in the case of the German occupation of Norway. Japanese was the only educational and administrative language. All Koreans were ordered to take Japanese names. (A similar story from our part of the world is perhaps the Norwegianisation policy against the Sami.) These were the circumstances young Koreans like Kim Jong Su grew up in and turned against. North Korea expert Bradley Martin puts it this way: Kim was a patriot long before he became a communist. “No feeling in the world is greater, more noble or more sacred than patriotism,” Kim wrote in his memoirs towards the end of his life.

It is tempting to claim that Kim Il Sung was *always* a Korean nationalist first and a communist second, not even a very close second. Ironically enough, though, he had spent most of his life abroad when the Soviet occupying army appointed him leader of North Korea after World War II. He was apparently no longer even fluent in Korean at the time. As a child, he had emigrated with his family to Chinese Manchuria, a border area with a significant presence of both exiled Korean nationalist circles and groups connected to the growing Chinese communist guerrilla. His Chinese lower secondary school teacher, who later became one of the leading historians of communist China, introduced the sixteen-year-old Song Ju to Lenin’s writings, Soviet writers like Gorky and the works of prominent members of the Chinese Communist Party. A few years later, in 1931, imperial Japan occupied the entire vast Manchurian province and turned it into the puppet state of Manchukuo. About at the same time, Song Ju joined the resistance struggle against the Japanese and eventually became the leader of his own company, which mainly consisted of exiled Koreans and was formally a part of the Chinese communist guerrilla. It was at this time he took the name that would one day be so famous, infamous and revered. *Il Sung* is composed of the characters for “sun” and “star”, both central metaphors in later North Korean state propaganda down to our day and age. Both his and Kim Jong Il’s birthdays are celebrated in great state as the “Day of the Sun” and the “Day of the Shining Star”, respectively.

There is little doubt even among independent historians that Kim Il Sung’s role in the resistance movement against the Japanese was both important and real, despite the lack of reliable sources from a distant time in an inaccessible part of the world, and the subsequent manic exaggerations of his cult of personality. In time, he acquired a reputation as a competent and brave commander and was well-liked by his soldiers. Inside Korea itself, the Japanese essentially were in total control. Local guerrilla leaders were either dead, had given up, or, like Kim, had escaped across the border to China. From mobile bases in the vast and rugged Manchuria, symbolically important but militarily quite insignificant surprise attacks were carried out inside Japanese-occupied Korean territory before retreating back across the border again. Bold and spectacular raids like the attack on the border village of Pochonbo in 1937 have the same place in North Korean history – and the national self-image – as the heavy water sabotage action at Rjukan has in ours. It contributed to the young, handsome and charismatic Il Sung’s growing hero status both inside and outside his home country. He also made common cause with the Chinese communist forces in their own operations against the Japanese, a help Mao would repay with interests during the Korean War twenty years later.

The years as a guerrilla commander for the “partisans” were crucial to the development of Kim Il Sung’s personality and worldview. Along with the Korean War, this is a cornerstone of North Korean national identity: the shrimp against the whale, David against Goliath or Asterix’ brave Gauls against the mighty Roman Empire. He was one of few prominent resistance heroes in the struggle against a colonial regime that went much further in its systematic brutality and racism than the Germans ever did in Norway. This would gain Kim Il Sung a lot of popular support over the whole Korean Peninsula long before liberation from the Japanese.

During World War II, hundreds of thousands of Koreans were sent to Japan as forced labourers for military and civil industries or conscripted as soldiers in the imperial army. Most humiliating of all for Korean self-esteem, however, was the phenomenon of “comfort women”. Tens of thousands of women from Japanese-occupied countries were held as sex slaves for Japanese troops stationed all over the Pacific region, and a large part of them were Korean. Now Korea had been raped by Japan not only figuratively, but also quite literally. Both the assaulter and the victim will almost regardless of cultural background and circumstances be burdened with a strong sense of shame for the rest of their lives. Very often, they will attempt to keep the assault a secret. In traditionally conservative and male-chauvinist cultures like the Japanese and the Korean, shame came on top of the humiliation Koreans already had felt as colonial subjects for almost a generation. It became a national trauma that continues to poison the relationship between both Koreas and Japan to this day. Things were made no better by the fact that the assaulter, Japan, waited 55 years to issue its apology, and then only to South Korea. Also, in 2010, very few of both the perpetrators and the victims were still alive.

Understandably, an overwhelming majority of Koreans chose to make the best of the situation and adapt to the occupying power, as Norwegians did under the Germans. Very few, if any, could imagine anything other than Japanese colonial rule lasting for the foreseeable future, so the subsequent North Korean account of Kim Il Sung as an uncommonly uncompromising and consistent warrior throughout Japanese colonial rule does have, after all, solid basis in reality.

At the time, however, the struggle was becoming more and more uneven and hopeless. Around 1940, the Japanese had effectively stamped out all organised resistance also in Manchuria/Manchukuo, and Kim had little other choice but to flee to the east and into the Soviet Union along with the rest of his company. Here, he and his men were incorporated into the Soviet army and transferred to an army camp near Khabarovsk, just twenty miles or so from the Chinese border. Kim was appointed captain of a separate company composed of his own brothers-in-arms from Manchuria, Soviet Koreans, and Chinese communists with connections to Mao’s guerrilla.

It is around this time that Kim Il Sung, and thus the subsequent official North Korean account of history, makes a characteristic manoeuvre by expanding and “improving” on actual events and turning them into unassailable myths. The one and only established truth in post-war North Korea is that Kim Il Sung continued to fight the Japanese throughout World War II from “secret bases” on the Korean Peninsula’s sacred Mount Paektu in the far north of the country, until he – and *not* the Americans or Stalin’s Red Army – forced the occupiers to capitulate in 1945. According to the same historical account, Kim Jong Il was born in one of his father’s guerrilla camps on Mount Paektu with enemy bullets practically whining around his ears. In fact, his years in the Soviet Union during World War II were quite the reverse for Kim Il Sung: a kind of convalescence allowing him to recover after well over ten years of cat-and-mouse games against an overwhelming enemy in a tough and merciless climate, with winter temperatures often dropping to minus forty degrees. The same applied to the two dozen surviving comrades-in-arms who had fled by his side. Many of them would later become his loyal supporters in the North Korean apparatus of power. Among them were his future wife, Kim Jong Suk, who had joined his company a few years earlier. They got married right after their arrival to the Soviet Union, and in 1942 she gave birth to their first son, Kim Jong Il, in the little village of Viatskoye near the camp.

These five years of relative prosperity and security also allowed Kim Il Sung to build networks and alliances within the Soviet military leadership, where he was held in good regard. He was compliant and obedient towards his superiors, but commanded discipline and respect among his men. Soviet society’s prostrate adoration of the almost godlike “People’s Father”, Stalin, not unlike the Japanese’s self-sacrificing loyalty to their emperor, must also have made a strong and lasting impression on him. These imported phenomena would also become main components in Kim’s “self-sufficient” state system.

**1945-1950: LIBERATION AND PARTITION**

When the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Japan into final capitulation in August 1945, the victorious new superpowers of the US and the Soviet Union agreed to place the Korean Peninsula under divided administration until order was restored and free elections could be held. The Americans took control of the southern half up to the 38th parallel, while the Soviet Union moved in and occupied the northern parts of the country.

The country’s “liberation” turned out to be a mere transition between two forms of occupation by greater powers – an apparently eternally recurrent confirmation of Korea’s curse as the shrimp between the whales. In addition, the country was now divided into two equal parts for the first time in many centuries.

More than a month after the Japanese capitulation, a Soviet fighting ship docked in the eastern seaport of Wonsan. Among its passengers was Kim Il Sung, who is said to have taken his first steps on Korean soil in peacetime still wearing his Soviet captain’s uniform. A clever old Hollywood producer has said that luck is when opportunities meet preparation.[[37]](#footnote-37) The Soviets needed a loyal Korean leader with a spotless political record and patriotic credibility, someone who unlike practically the entire Korean national elite had not compromised himself by cooperating with the Japanese. It also worked to his advantage that Kim had a very limited network inside Korea itself after so many years in exile. He was therefore largely dependent on his Soviet benefactors – at least for the first few years. Kim was cut and dried for the role he had now been assigned. At the same time, the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union was frosty and heading straight towards the Cold War. This made the Korean Peninsula a very attractive piece of real estate in the middle of a region of increasing strategic importance which both superpowers were unwilling to leave to the other’s influence. Instead of the promised unified national elections, the two halves of Korea were proclaimed separate states in 1948.

Understandably, very few Koreans were particularly happy about this state of affairs, neither Kim Il Sung, his southern counterpart Rhee Syngman, nor their respective populations. The great majority of Koreans felt that the partition of the country was against nature and unfair, and both heads of state were impatient to reunite Korea under their own leadership. Since the foundation of both states in the autumn of 1948, the demilitarised zone (DMZ) along the 38th parallel became the site of minor and major clashes between North and South Korean forces. Meanwhile, both Kim and Rhee harped on at their high patrons in Moscow and Washington to make them approve a full-scale war of aggression. To the great frustration of the warmongering Rhee, the Americans refused to equip his forces with heavy artillery. They had good reason to fear he would take the first opportunity to use them in a precipitous attack against North Korea.

Instead, it was Kim who got the thumbs up first. In the spring of 1950, the US had pulled out all of its forces from South Korea, in accordance with the agreement between the superpowers, and in Moscow, Stalin felt quite confident that the Americans would stay away. He therefore gave Kim his consent. Throughout the period of divided administration, the Soviets had built up the arsenal of Kim Il Sung’s Korean People’s Army (KPA) with both light weaponry and heavier artillery, making the KPA vastly superior to its southern adversary both in numbers and resources. Another crucial factor playing to Kim’s advantage was that the communists had taken power in China under Mao Zedong in 1949. Now two of the world’s most populous countries had Kim Il Sung’s back both ideologically, militarily and not least geographically, as the country shares its longest border with China’s north-eastern province of Manchuria. South Korea and the US, on the other hand, were divided by seven time zones and the world’s biggest ocean, the Pacific. China and North Korea were further connected by the fact that Kim Il Sung had fought alongside Mao’s forces in Manchuria and also assisted Mao militarily in the final phases of the Chinese Civil War. Upon Mao’s victory in the Chinese Civil War, the Korean People’s Army could therefore be reinforced with thousands of battle-trained soldiers returning home.[[38]](#footnote-38)

**1950-1953: THE GREAT FATHERLAND LIBERATION WAR (THE KOREAN WAR)**

On the morning of June 25, 1950, North Korean tanks crossed the 38th parallel under the cover of heavy artillery bombardment in a massive attack along the whole DMZ. Kim Il Sung justified the offensive with the claim that South Korean forces had attacked first and forced North Korea to defend itself. This has become an established fact in North Korea for all posterity, and a centrepiece of the legend of Kim Il Sung as a military genius and protector of the North Korean people: *No Motherland without you.*

The South Korean forces, having far less manpower as well as being badly equipped, untrained and poorly motivated, could do nothing to stop Kim’s *blitzkrieg.* Three days later the People’s Army captured the capital, Seoul, and rolled on southwards meeting little resistance. So far, the war was a victory march for Kim Il Sung. But just two days after the attack, the UN Security Council passed a resolution at the United States’ initiative encouraging its member states to intervene on South Korea’s behalf.

At the same time, US president Truman obtained congressional approval to deploy American troops as the main forces of the UN coalition. Soldiers were transferred from military bases in Japan, and the first major clashes took place about a week after the outbreak of war. This was not, however, enough to hold back the KPA’s victory march.

In the beginning of September, the North Koreans had gained control of 90 percent of the peninsula’s territory, while what remained of the South Korean army and its American reinforcements were cornered around the south-eastern seaport of Busan. The KPA now became a victim of its own success. The unexpectedly rapid advance had stretched the army’s supply lines, making it unable to keep the upper hand at the so-called Busan Perimeter.

The UN forces were thus able to regroup behind the perimeter, under the cover of US bombing raids and with new supplies, soldiers and weapons shipped in from Japan. This then allowed them to mount a successful counterattack and break out of the Busan Perimeter.

At the same time, under the command of the legendary and controversial general McArthur, the Americans carried out a massive landing operation far up on the north-western coast, near the weakly fortified seaside town of Incheon a little south of Seoul. This surprise pincer movement proved catastrophic to the KPA, which began a panicked retreat to avoid being completely cut off from its rearguard. Thousands of North Korean soldiers deserted or were taken prisoner. Now the UN forces were advancing north as quickly and efficiently as the North Koreans previously had rolled in the opposite direction. In Moscow, Stalin tore out his hair over the failure and what he considered the incompetence of the North Korean generals. He also lay much of the blame on the Soviet military advisors he had put at Kim’s disposal.

Massacres and serious war crimes were common on both sides. In the wake of the advancing North Korean army, mass executions were carried out both of prisoners of war (mainly North Korean) and suspected “unreliable elements” such as intellectuals, administrators, local politicians and others judged to be potential threats to the new order. The same thing occurred again in reverse during the North Korean retreat, when the Americans often let their South Korean allies do the dirty work, resulting in the mass murder of thousands of real and suspected communists and sympathisers.

One of the most infamous events took place near the town of **Sinchon**. The North Korean state propaganda has turned it into something of an origin story of the American imperialists’ inherent evil.[[39]](#footnote-39) But although mass murder, torture and summary executions were bad enough, the American bombardments, especially of the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, were without comparison the greatest cause of destruction and loss of human life. Then as now, the North Korean army had an almost non-existent air force and poorly developed antiaircraft defence. The Soviet Union contributed a handful of MiG fighters flown by their own pilots and a few Chinese and North Korean colleagues, offering the Americans resistance wherever they were able to. Stalin had made it crystal clear that he didn’t want to risk a broader, direct conflict with the US. The Soviet Union’s role would therefore be limited to equipment deliveries and an advisory function. As a result, the US and the UN coalition had total dominion of the air.

Down on the ground, there were once again American forces standing at the 38th parallel. In this respect, they had fulfilled the UN’s mandate of saving South Korea from annihilation, but the ambitious general McArthur had wind in his sails and took, with Washington’s discreet approval, the fateful decision of crossing the old dividing line and pushing north to throw the communists out of Korea once and for all.

The North Korean defence commando was rapidly disintegrating, and the army’s panic-stricken flight northwards along the peninsula (in the North Korean state mythology, a “brilliant tactical retreat planned by general Kim Il Sung”) opened the way for American ground forces, which in the late autumn of 1950 had advanced all the way up to the Chinese border in certain sectors of the front.

Ever since the Americans crossed the partition line and advanced north, Kim Il Sung had desperately appealed to Mao Zedong to let the Chinese People’s Army come to his rescue. Mao in his turn had warned US president Truman through diplomatic channels that he would not accept a unified and capitalist Korea. In his opinion, the US and the UN coalition had violated the UN resolution by invading North Korea. His warnings were not taken seriously. As a result, at the end of October, more than two hundred thousand soldiers from the Chinese People’s Army, renamed “volunteers” for the occasion so that China would not formally be at war with the US and the UN, moved into North Korea from the north and entered the war on Kim Il Sung’s side.

Mao’s soldiers had both the advantage of numbers and recent battle experience from their victory in the Chinese Civil War. Soon the US and the UN forces were pushed south again.

To all intents and purposes, the Chinese army now took command of North Korea’s warfare from the end of 1950 onwards, in what may safely be assumed to have been a humiliating personal loss of prestige for Kim Il Sung. In subsequent North Korean state mythology, the decisive Chinese war effort has of course been heavily downplayed in favour of the myth of Kim Il Sung’s unrivalled military genius. The North Korean army leadership and troops were demoted to junior partners in their own war, in yet another reflection of the power dynamics on the opposing side, between the US and South Korea. Once again, Korea had become a shrimp – or rather, two shrimps – between whales. Six months after Kim Il Sung’s spectacular blitzkrieg, most of the Korean Peninsula had been razed to the ground several times by advancing or retreating armies. Seoul, for example, changed hands no less than four times during the first year of war. Little by little, the fronts settled around the old dividing line at the 38th parallel.

The situation was deadlocked, with a few minor shifts this way or that, until the parties accepted that none of them were getting anywhere and entered an ill-tempered ceasefire on July 27, 1953.

The ceasefire has never ended in a peace treaty, which means that more than 60 years later, technically and formally, North Korea is still at war with the US, South Korea and the UN. It’s an important circumstance to bear in mind when you’re struck by how thoroughly militarised North Korean society is: They are actually still at war, and it will take more actors than a circus horse like Donald Trump to change that state of affairs, not least North Korea’s high patron, China.

**1953-1977 RECONSTRUCTION AND THE GOLDEN AGE**

It is estimated that during the three years of the Korean War, the US Air Force released more bombs over North Korea – a territory the size of Norway’s three northernmost provinces combined – than over the whole Pacific area including Japan throughout World War II. The destruction was so extensive that already halfway through the war, American pilots noted with resignation that there were no more targets left to bomb. The North Koreans’ response was to dig in.

During the war, factories, armament industry, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure were rebuilt underground in ingenious systems of bunkers, mountain chambers and corridors. Up in the daylight, not one stone was left on another. With what can fairly be called the sheer nerve of absolute power, Kim Il Sung and the North Korean leadership celebrated a crushing victory in The Great Fatherland Liberation War, as the Korean War is still known north of the 38th parallel. They did so with a grand military parade in the middle of Pyongyang. But every cloud has a silver lining: Total destruction allowed Kim to start with a clean slate and crayons and rebuild both the capital and the rest of the country in his own image. Generous material and technological aid poured into North Korea from its communist “sister nations”, the Soviet Union and the new satellite states in Eastern Europe. Included in the aid package were engineers, architects and advisors for most sectors of society. At the same time, Kim Il Sung ruthlessly purged all potential political opposition and consolidated the absolute and unrivalled power his Korean Worker’s Party has held on to ever since. The years as a kind of Korean combination of Max Manus, Gunnar Sønsteby and king Haakon VII were now followed by Kim Il Sung’s long-lasting Einar Gerhardsen period. Most North Koreans associate the period of his rule after the Korean War with reconstruction, fellowship and sacrifice, but also, little by little, with prosperity and social security.

**THE WONDER CHILDREN**

Our children are the kings and queens of our country and our hope for the future.

KIM IL SUNG

Kim further consolidated his role as a national patriarch by siring several illegitimate children over the years, both with his own mistresses and apparently, in some cases, with the wives of his subordinates.

Much more crucial to the pact between the people and its leaders – and a circumstance the state propaganda would subsequently turn into one of the central tenets of the North Korean state – was the fate of the tens of thousands of children who had been orphaned by the Korean War.

Kim gave orders to build orphanages and schools for the “children of the martyrs of the Fatherland” all over North Korea.[[40]](#footnote-40) These children were given security, food, clothes and schooling, and from then on also raised to think of Kim Il Sung as their father. This was especially the case in institutions such as the Mangyongdae School for the Orphaned Children of Revolutionaries, where large parts of the country’s future military and security establishment elite received their education.[[41]](#footnote-41) In this way, a whole generation of loyal supporters was created that owed an eternal debt of gratitude to the Great Leader. They were instilled with a national idea of loving and fatherly devotion to the country as a whole.

Once again, the revolutionary state propaganda knew very well that there was no need to reinvent the wheel, and once again it built on the old and Confucian-influenced Korean culture based on both family loyalty and children’s respect for their parents. A father should be both loved and feared. But children generally need two parents, after all. In his thought-provoking analysis of the content of North Korea’s state propaganda, *The Cleanest Race,* Korea expert B. R. Myers makes one of a number of interesting observations. One is how the propaganda in both visual and textual form evolved in time to also emphasise the *maternal* aspects of the leadership’s personalities: Kim Il Sung is rarely if ever shown in combat situations, despite the endless paintings, posters, statues and mosaics depicting his heroic struggle against the Japanese. On the contrary, we often see him with a kind smile on his face, clasping to his increasingly ample bosom anything and everyone from joyful little children to wounded soldiers and the old and feeble.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Blessing a selection of the building blocks of society, from microbreweries to oil platforms, with a visit and at least a half-hearted show of interest, is part of the ordinary working day for most heads of state. In North Korea, this ritual is known as *on-the-spot guidance* and has practically become the trademark of all three generations of the Kim dynasty.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The entire country’s total production of everything from cucumbers and empty bottles to tractors and atomic missiles evidently needs to be touched and smilingly marvelled at with clasped hands – in addition to the customary hugging and consoling of over-exited subjects who have been moved to tears. It’s more like the behaviour of a meddlesome, but kindly grandmother than that of a severe general. Myers claims the Kim leadership deliberately lets itself be portrayed as a combined father and mother figure precisely in order to activate and reinforce a culturally conditioned and deeply ingrained family loyalty, which can also be directed towards the state and its symbols.

In this division of responsibilities between the state and its citizens, there is also a kind of infantilization of the population, which is encouraged to perceive itself as innocent and naïve, in constant need of the state’s protection against harmful influences, bad friends and the evils of the world. In this way, throughout the ages, religions, cults and sects everywhere have sought to tap into the role and function of the family in the lives of their members.[[44]](#footnote-44)

*Dear Mr. Win!*

*Lord knows I’ve tried to explain countless times, both to you and others in the Ministry, that most foreigners have, ehm, mixed feelings at best about the children’s performances you are so proud of (quite rightly!) and insist on showing us again and again. It goes without saying that we are profoundly and wholeheartedly impressed by the North Korean children’s amazing skills in both music, dance, song, drawing, painting, calligraphy and sports – in short, in anything that can be shown to an audience.*

*From kindergarten on, most North Korean children learn technical skills that only the most professional child and youth performers in the West are able to master. The same applies to stage experience. Throw an eraser over your shoulder at any point during a round tour of, say, the gigantic after-school recreational centre, Mangyongdae Children’s Palace, during Morten the First’s visit, and chances are you’ll hit a North Korean ten-year-old with song-and-dance skills that make our own Marcus and Martinus look like Karius and Bactus.[[45]](#footnote-45)*

*The gigantic mass games you arrange for jubilees with round-number years are quite deservedly world-famous and could probably not have been performed on that scale or with that level of precision anywhere but in the DPRK. Not to disparage the tens of thousands of elite gymnasts, dancers and acrobats on the field and the “main stage” of the May Day stadium, but their backdrop is what truly defies comprehension for any parent of teenagers from my part of the world: Ten thousand 14-year-olds with coloured cardboard posters forming the pixels of a living picture book, coordinated with the precision of God switching channels with a remote control. Not a single error. Not a single deviation. IL SIM DAN GYOL. And it is precisely this mind-bending perfectionism that can easily create the opposite effect of the one (I assume) you want to achieve: It can appear scary and inhuman to a foreign audience – just a notch above trained monkeys or pre-programmed androids. Not to mention the sheer amount of practice, practice and more practice required to attain those levels of skill and self-discipline. And what about coercion and threats, by the way? We’re not used to children who don’t make mistakes, you know.*

*Generally speaking, child-rearing in our part of the world, like so many other things, is shaped by the fact that our parental guidelines and notions of right and wrong are less clear-cut than in your country. That’s why we are often impressed by your child performances, but never touched to the core, which I can understand you may find a little bit upsetting: Well, yeah, but aren’t they* brilliant? *Because like all parents throughout the ages, you are genuinely proud of your children. And those who make you proudest of all, of course, are your own biological children.*

*You love your own daughter with an unconditional love. One of the reasons I know your paternal love is so deeply felt, is that I see you trying to hold back, but not quite being able to. When you’re with Jong Sun, your heart overflows. We’ll be having a beer at your favourite pub near your home, and you’ll call her out of the blue with the excuse that she ought to come by and practice her still quite basic English with me. Once, she handed me a note that said: “Thank you for loving my apple.” A few days earlier, you had brought me a green apple she had asked you to give me, and I told you to say hallo and thank her from me. But most of all, you want her there because you’re so proud of her and of the ordinary and fantastic fact of her existence on this Earth. She’s a young lady now and has just begun her studies at Kim Il Sung University. Soon you’ll have to bring out the proverbial shotgun to keep the suitors away. Like so many other Korean girls and young women, Jong Sun frets about her height. She’s small – petite and shapely, but short, though not unusually so by local standards. Of course, I never ask if her height might have something to do with the fact that she was born at the end of the 1990s, during the initial phases of The Arduous March. It’s quite obvious that your relationship isn’t based on discipline and scolding. You’re more like two buddies, and I recognise the playful bickering from our own relationship. When she tells you to “jotggasó!” it’s with a tone that says: “I love you, you old fool.”[[46]](#footnote-46) And that’s exactly how you take it. I believe in Jong Sun, you know that. She’s going to be all right, no matter what happens to North Korea and the big picture in the short or long term.*

*Whenever I see you two together, I am reminded of how strong and at the same time fragile family ties are. Like my own, at times. You know I need a pen and paper to explain my family background to outsiders, even in my own part of the world, where divorced parents have become very common these past few decades. My own family tree would look more like a thicket of straight and unbroken lines, dotted lines, zig zag lines, various partly overlapping circles and constellations, half-brothers, half-sisters, half-brothers’ half-brothers, step-parents, ex-step-parents and so on. For better or worse, I grew up without ever being part of a single, clear-cut, solid, unambiguous, unshakeable or oppressive family constellation. It wasn’t until I got married and had my own and others’ children that I eventually thought – or rather hoped – I’d be able to achieve it myself. Even then, of course, it turned out not to be so simple. We all have our issues. Trust is a fragile thing.*

*One thing I’ve learned the hard way is the importance of flesh and blood – the bloodline, as you call it in Korea – and how much of a child’s self-image and identity-building, for better or worse, is caught up in who (and what) its biological parents are. We backup parents who turn up as intruders with our clumsy, needy desire for trust, may find ourselves facing a tough, often impossible match in the child’s loyalty to its real mum and dad.*

*All understanding begins with empathy. Not sympathy, which all too often is the well-meaning half-sister of contempt, but empathy – that is to say the ability to project oneself into the other’s experience of the world.*

*I’m not sure you’ll welcome the comparison, but whenever I try to explain something to outsiders about the often deeply felt loyalty you and all of the other children of the Juche system feel for your country, I often turn to the Australian film classic,* Bad Boy Bubby. *The film is named after its main character, Bubby, who lives alone with his alcoholic mother in a basement flat in a desolate industrial area.[[47]](#footnote-47) He has never gone to school or played with other children, because his mother has kept him completely isolated in the flat. Their relationship is characterised by equal parts affection and fear, shaped by the mother’s unpredictable and sudden switches between fits of rage and merciless methods of physical punishment, and her just as sudden shifts back to an almost boundless tenderness and care. It’s Bubby and her against the world, she often whispers as she clasps him tight in her arms. She speaks of Bubby’s absent father, whom he has never met, with great hatred and bitterness, but one nevertheless senses that he is the love of her life. Every day, Bubby has to promise he’ll never seek out the world beyond the apartment, which his mother says is full of murderers, monsters, suffering and misery. The air is poisonous, and he’ll die out there. That’s why they always have to keep the door locked with all the safety locks she has fitted. He believes her, of course. And so it’s no wonder the almost middle-aged Bubby suffers from what you could call arrested development – his level of mental and linguistic development is that of a seven-year-old – and displays severe autistic traits. In the world outside of North Korea, there are many other famous examples of long-term basement imprisonment leading to big gaps in the crucial early socialisation process, which has resulted in some children remaining handicapped for life. Kasper Hauser is one example. The Fritzl children another. The question, then, is whether the best treatment for these “basement children” is even more isolation? What do you think, Mr. Win?*

1. 일심단결 is one of the regime’s favourite propaganda slogans: “Single-hearted unity”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All of the above characterisations of North Korea in general and yours truly in particular are taken from the so-called think tank Civita’s coverage of my art projects in collaboration with the North Korean authorities since 2012. With one exception, the tweet about the treasonous trio Quisling/Traavik/Anderson, credited to the twitter user @rabiatus.] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The party organ *Rodong Sinmun* (The Worker’s Newspaper), 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Korea Today,* 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Panorama of Korea, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Forget it, a good Norwegian will never disclose the location of our real troll shops to a foreigner. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Panorama of Korea, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A word of advice based on personal experience: The letters P and O are adjacent on most keyboards. When communicating with North Korea, make sure to check that you’ve written DPRK and not DORK. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Understanding Korea 1: Nature,* Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang Juche 105 (2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *European Council Regulation No. 329/200 of 27 March 2007 concerning restrictive measure against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,* article 4: “It shall be prohibited […] to sell, supply, transfer or export, directly or indirectly, luxury goods to North Korea.” (This can and should, however, raise the question of whether disco is to be defined as luxury product or nescessity.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Editorials in *Rodong Sinmun,* 2009 and 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example http://traavik.info/works/discocracy [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. English names of places and objects of interest will be used where appropriate, since it is the language most Western tourists will be using to communicate with the North Koreans. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *ri* = old Korean unit of measurement corresponding to roughly 400 metres [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Museum guides in North Korea are always women. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. All recipes are taken from the *Korean Culinary Book #1: Best Recipes of Pyongyang,* Cooks Association of the DPRK 1998. Possible questions, complaints, feedback and compensation claims can be addressed to the publisher, DPRK’s Cooks Association, by phone: (+859) 2 381 86 89, or fax: (+859) 2 281 47 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. If you want, you can cheat a little and buy ready-made buckwheat noodles – also known as soba noodles – in a well-assorted Asian grocery store or a health food shop. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Directly translated: “moonshine” (which is just as widespread in the rural districts of North Korea as it is in northern Norway), but used figuratively to mean “naff”, “hillbilly”, “country bumpkin” or “redneck.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Nol sae is* North Korean slang for «playboy», «sneaky rascal», «party animal». [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was actually founded the same year as Orwell finished writing the book, that is in 1948. Orwell switched the two last numbers, giving him both the title of the book and the epoch in which it is set. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION REGULATION (EC) No 329/2007 of 27 March 2007, concerning restrictive measures against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. A bit of bonus material: http://www.yhchang.com/CUNNILINGUS\_IN\_NORTH\_KOREA.html [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Nudge, nudge. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nudge, nudge. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Asked if he wanted to remain anonymous, our dear maestro answered: “And HIDE??? I know that cowardice is indeed a French tradition, but still. I’m proud of my handskills! Let it be known to the world!” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Jean is referring to the **Meari Shooting Range**, where you in addition to regular targets and empty bottles can choose from different types of caged poultry – from hens to pheasants. On a good day, you can shoot your own dinner. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. According to Valnoir, the nuclear bomb-induced earthquake wasn’t enough of a distraction to stop him from completing his third “happy finish” of the day at that point. *La République En Marche!* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Naturally, *The Masturbator’s Guide to Pyongyang* is presented from the author’s male perspective. We nevertheless hope and believe that its content, with the exception of certain precautions of a practical-hygienic nature, will be equally relevant and handy to women. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “Hillbilly” – see page [] [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Deliverance,* directed by John Boorman, USA, 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. www.norwaybears.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. P.J. O’Rourke: *Give War a Chance,* Picador, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Morten Jørgensen’s story is based on the interview “Beyond Siberia the East is Red” with Jon Rognlien, which is electronic bonus material to *The Great ML-book* (Kagge Forlag, 2009) and conversations with yours truly. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The Chinese characters for “son of Heaven” and “pillar”. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. … in North Korea. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Kim, Il Sung: *With the Century,* memoirs (volumes I-VIII), Pyongyang, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Robert Evans in *The Kid Stays in the Picture,* documentary, USA, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Mao is said to have subsequently called China’s and North Korea’s relationship “as close as lips and teeth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Most more or less independent historians agree on the fact that the atrocities probably were carried out by the South Korean army, which doesn’t quite fit with the North Korean propaganda’s basic narrative of the Koreans as eternal victims of the great powers. There is, however, a lot to suggest that the American forces stationed in the vicinity could have partly or entirely prevented the massacre, but failed to intervene. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. One fourth of North Korea’s population of roughly 10 million in 1950 is estimated to have died during the war. Ref. *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader,* Bradley K. Martin, St. Martin’s Press, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The school still exists. In step with the times and the diminishing number of orphans, it has changed its name to Manyongdae Revolutionary School, but it is still primarily reserved for the children of the inner and most loyal elite. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. B. R. Myers: *The Cleanest Race*, Melville House Publishing, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See for example https://kimjongillookingatthings.tumblr.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Consider, too, the mafia’s *la famiglia* or Charles Manson’s *The Family.* [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. It should be noted that the repertoire during such performances is limited to vigorous patriotic marches, lyrical folk songs, odes to the leadership and the occasional Soviet musak number. So Marcus and Martinus would at least initially have a few rehearsal nights’ worth of a head start if it came to a pop battle – and if they played home, of course. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Jotggasó = Go suck yourself! [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Bad Boy Bubby,* directed by Rolf de Heer, Australia, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)