

My North Korean Encounter

I have a confession to make: Having just received my acceptance letter from CBS in the summer of 2009, I skipped the very first week of lectures... Recognising the academic quality and exclusivity of the International Business undergraduate programme at CBS, I do realise that opting out of the introductory lectures might come across as either arrogant, ignorant or just plain stupid. However, I did skip the first few lectures for a reason; I went to the DPRK.

DPRK is the acronym for North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The official name is slightly dubious as it's certainly not a democratic country, and with the path seemingly paved for a third-generation Kim to inherit the leadership of the nation, it may even be questioned whether or not the country is a true republic. The name we tend to use in the West doesn't quite cut it either, as "North Korea" is perceived by the North Koreans to be a derogatory moniker. I learnt to stick with "DPRK" as soon as I landed in Pyongyang Sunan International Airport.

Before digging further into my endeavours in Pyongyang, the capital of the DPRK, allow me to briefly introduce myself and my reasons for heading to the perhaps most prominent member of the so-called Axis of Evil. At the time, I had been studying and working in southern China for about two years and I felt that I was beginning to understand some of the subtle nuances present in the Chinese version of a communist society. Largely through the influence of my Chinese friends, I had undergone a transition from observing communist regimes as nothing but malign and destructive to their peoples, to admiring the modern achievements of the Chinese Communist Party. Despite the economical wonders of China's re-emerge, I realise there are tonnes of issues yet to be solved in China – who said human rights? – but lifting several hundred million people out of poverty within the span of three decades is a remarkable feat whether you're a fan of the ideology or not. I'd like to stress that I haven't turned commie nor anything along those lines, but my time in China did teach me to view the world as everything but black and white. In other words, through the friends I made in China, I had learnt a great deal about differing worldviews and gradually I became dead set on exploring the human face of China's neighbouring peninsula.

I got hold of a contact that helped me obtain a valid tourist visa for the DPRK and booked a flight ticket from Beijing to Pyongyang through a travel agency approved by the North Korean authorities. Travelling was very smooth, even on board the 1968 Tupolev aircraft that took an unusually long time to slow down after touching the runway in Pyongyang. Later on, I learnt that this procedure is a measure applied to help extend the lifetime of the brakes that would otherwise get worn down faster (I suppose you've got to save anywhere you can). Believe it or not, clearing customs was a breeze, and all of a sudden I found myself greeted by Mr Ahn and Miss Suh, our guides-to-be.

Wherever I've been travelling, my clearest memories are always of the people I bump into along the way, and my two North Korean guides are no exception. Mr Ahn, an elderly gentleman with a friendly smile, was by far the senior of the two. I spent 5 days in the DPRK, and everyday he would wear the same blue-collared shirt accompanied by a pair of dark blue slacks. Miss Suh, on the other hand, was a beautiful young woman in her mid-twenties who was dressed in modern clothing taken right off the shelves of H&M or the like. She was stylish, wore make-up and the only thing that gave her away was a small pin

decorated with a picture of comrades Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il that never came off her chest.

Throughout the 5 days I spent in the DPRK, Mr Ahn and Miss Suh were eager to tell me and the small group of tourists with whom I had flown to Pyongyang about the political, military and social milestones achieved in the DPRK. They were both highly respectful when talking about various foreign nations but occasionally burst out some rather blunt comments when talking about domestic issues. I remember a British guy in the tour group who asked about the current living conditions in the rural areas of the DPRK, to which Mr Ahn quirkily replied: "I think you know just as well as I do." Other times, a question would simply be met by silence and a look in the opposite direction.

As the days passed, and as we got better acquainted, our two guides would slowly open up to conversations about other things than the DPRK itself. Mr Ahn was experienced in not revealing too much about his personal life while giving the impression that he told us everything there was to know. He had travelled in several European and South-East Asian countries, and the fact that he had been granted a passport obviously revealed his rank within the Workers' Party of Korea. A rank he seems to have earned through lifelong loyalty to the Kim rulers. He told me he was married, had two grown-up daughters and even pointed out his apartment block as we drove by. It could have all been bullshit, but then, why would it? I kept telling myself not to get fooled by their stories and seemingly Western sense of humour, but at some point I had to believe in at least some of it, as I would otherwise have alienated them.

Miss Suh was hard to crack open. Supposedly, because of her young age, she didn't have the experience in dealing with groups of foreign visitors and the boundaries that were constantly laid upon us, and as a result she would often consult Mr Ahn. She seemed anxious and somewhat shy throughout most of the trip, but I managed to strike up a few private conversations with her. She told me how she had graduated from university in Singapore and that she would often travel to China for pleasure. She was unmarried, but she admitted to have a boyfriend. Adding up these titbits of information, I came to believe that she is likely the daughter or granddaughter of a high-ranking officer within the Workers' Party. She was obviously wary of what personal information she would share with me, but as she also spoke Mandarin, we could converse in Chinese without anyone getting even the slightest gist of what we were talking about. In some aspects, she seemed immature and naive, while in other aspects she would turn quite stern – I then knew I had hit the taboo button and would start all over with a new topic. Most of all, Miss Suh just seemed like a young girl longing for a stroll through the malls of Singapore.

Calling my travels in the DPRK heavily restricted would be an understatement. Thus, my impression of the country is partly dominated by the things I did NOT see while I was there. In this essay, I could have chosen to write about the disabled people I didn't see anywhere; the 3 hour bus drive from Pyongyang to Kaesong during which I never saw a passing car; the beggars I didn't see; the retail shops I didn't see; or the streets of Pyongyang I didn't get to see as I was conveniently locked up in the Yanggakdo Hotel whenever I was not on the tour bus – for my own protection, I was told. However, in this essay I chose to write about the people I did in fact meet in the DPRK. No matter their agenda, Mr Ahn and Miss Suh left a long-lasting impression on me and I sincerely hope that I left a positive impression on them, too. I know only one way of changing the world for the better, and that is by interpersonal means, step by step, person by person.

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