

A Year in Pyongyang

by Andrew Holloway

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Chapter One

There are times in life when even the dullest and most complacent among us feel the need to make a change. It was at such a time in my life that a friend drew my attention to a job she had seen advertised on a Leeds University notice board. It was an unusual job in a little known country. The remuneration was not extravagant, but I estimated it would be sufficient for me to meet my ongoing commitments and save enough to tide me over on my return until I could find another job.

The country was the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, better known in the west as North Korea. The job entailed raising translations into English that Koreans had made of the works of their President, Kim Il Sung, his son and heir apparent Kim Jong Il, and sundry other propaganda.

A certain amount of kudos seemed to attach to this job. The advert stated that the successful applicant would be the first Briton to reside in this country since before the Second World War. The application forms were being issued by a Leeds University lecturer named Aidan Foster-Carter. North Korea was his special field of study. He had recently made a visit to the country when he had been asked to try and recruit a new English Language Reviser. Before submitting my application I took the opportunity of asking him what I could expect to find there. What he had to say was mostly reassuring.

Halfway through September I received a letter from Pyongyang. It was from David Richardson, a Zimbabwean and the present incumbent of the post. He informed me that I was likely to be offered the job. He had been doing it for two years. He said that there were disadvantages to living in Pyongyang, particularly "this business of the mail", but on the whole the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. A fortnight later he rang me at work to confirm my appointment. He added that a formal offer would arrive in the post shortly. I experienced a mixture of consternation and excitement. It looked as if for the first and probably only time in my life, I was about to do something different. I quelled my apprehensions by telling myself that no matter what sort of an experience it was, at least it would be an adventure. Some adventure. Being marooned on a desert island is undoubtedly a sort of adventure, as is doing time in jail for an offence one has not committed. But looked at from the right perspective, getting up each day, going to work and pursuing one's banal, petty bourgeois, provincial pleasures are also a form of adventure, and a lot more fun as well.

At the time I applied, all I knew about North Korea was that it was a communist state situated on a peninsula in North East Asia bordered on the North by China and the Soviet Union and opposite the islands of Japan; that it had a reputation for being bizarre and isolationist, an Asian equivalent to Albania; that there had been a war on the Korean peninsula in the early fifties in which United Nations troops, predominantly American but including contingents from Britain and a number of other countries, had participated against the north; that the war had ended in a stalemate with Korea partitioned into two countries, a capitalist south and a communist north; and most vividly I recalled that the North Korea football team

had pulled off some notable surprises in the 1966 World Cup Finals. When I received David Richardson's letter I thought I had better expand my knowledge. I went down to Leeds City Library but I could find virtually no material on Korea at all, or at least not on North Korea. I contacted Aidan Foster-Carter, who lent me a couple of books and several articles. This is the gist of what I read.

Korea, it seems has always been weird. The Koreans are an ancient people, established on their peninsula since time immemorial. For many centuries they maintained their distinct national identity, culture and independence, periodically repelling invasions from China and the Japanese samurai across the water. Independent and inward looking to the point of xenophobia, Korea was traditionally known as the hermit kingdom. As can happen to inward looking societies, for example North Korea today, the hermit kingdom began to fall behind the rest of the world in social and economic development. In the late nineteenth century it was feudal, corrupt, backward, and an easy prey for the Japanese who had long established informal domination over the peninsula before formally annexing it as a colony in 1910. It remained a Japanese colony until the end of the Second World War. When Japan fell in 1945, the Americans came in from the South while the Soviet troops descended from the North. They bumped into each other at the thirty-eighth parallel, about two thirds of the way up towards the northern border. The country of Korea was now partitioned just as Germany had been a few months earlier.

The Americans and the Russians set about installing native governments in their respective spheres of influence. They each aspired to set up the type of native government that would retain its territory within their sphere of influence after they had physically withdrawn. Among the Soviet forces was a Red Army major, a Korean who used to be called something different but had changed his name to Kim Il Sung, literally Kim the Sun, to make himself sound more impressive. He enjoyed a degree of popularity in Korea, particularly in the North. He had previously conducted a brave if ineffectual guerrilla resistance against the Japanese in the northern border areas and in South Manchuria. He was young, only thirty-three in 1945, charismatic, and a good orator. He already had his own little bit of communist political machinery in place from the resistance days. The Russians had little difficulty in installing him in power.

It was not proving so easy for the Americans down in the South to find a comparable political figure who could be relied upon to adhere to the ideals and policies to which they thought a good Korean should adhere and who could command sufficient popular support to maintain stable government. Reunification of Korea was out of the question. To the Americans it would have meant delivering the whole peninsula on a plate to the evil forces of communism. Kim the Sun was popular throughout Korea as a resistance hero and he had enough organisation to impose his will on the dissenters. As it was, even with all the resources of their military government, the American authorities had more than enough trouble rigging elections to give a veneer of democratic legitimacy to the puppet dictatorship on the man of their choice, Syngman Rhee.

In 1950, Kim the Sun decided that the time was ripe to reunify the nation. The Korean War started on June 25th, 1950. Three days later the North's forces entered Seoul, the capital of the South and formerly of the whole country. Syngman Rhee was not terribly popular. His troops did not fight enthusiastically. Within a few weeks the North's forces had nearly taken over the whole country. The Americans manipulated the United Nations into authorising a UN expeditionary force to drive the communists back.

Troops from sixteen nations took part in the invasion of Korea under the aegis of the UN, but by far the bulk of the men and armour were supplied by the USA. Confronted by better trained and infinitely better equipped forces, the men of the Korean People's Army were driven back North as quickly as they had initially come South. They were driven all the way back to the Amnok River on the Chinese border. There they were reinforced by a small detachment of a million Chinese. Now it was the turn of the UN forces to retreat.

The fighting came to an end three years later. An armistice was signed. Territorially

everyone was more or less where they were when they started. The country remained divided roughly along the thirty-eighth parallel. Demographically, the population of the North had been reduced from eleven million to nine million. The countryside of the North had been ravaged and napalmed. Its towns and cities had been bombed to rubble. In 1950 the population of Pyongyang was estimated to be around 200,000. According to the Americans' official statistics, they dropped approximately a quarter of a million bombs on it. The North Koreans predictably contend that this is a gross underestimate but one and a quarter bombs per person sounds like pretty serious warfare by anyone's standards.

It came as a considerable shock to me to discover the extent of the destruction that had been inflicted on the North of Korea. I always considered myself a reasonably well-informed sort of person but I had no idea, and I doubt that was atypical in this, that the carnage in Korea had been on a scale comparable to Vietnam. Shortly after my arrival in Pyongyang, a British film crew came over to make a television series about the war and so perhaps people are now better informed. I hope so because the Korean War should take its rightful place alongside the war in Vietnam as a permanent symbol and reminder of the hideous excesses of post-war US foreign policy and the dangers of irresponsible militarism. Also it is impossible to understand why North Korea has developed as it has over the past thirty-five years without a true appreciation of the holocaust that swept the country between 1950 and 1953. And the developments in North Korea and the Korean peninsula generally ought to be better understood, because the thirty-eighth parallel is one of the world's most sensitive potential trigger points for global disaster.

Of course it could be argued that the North Koreans were lucky to have got off so lightly. If MacArthur had had his way and not been recalled by Eisenhower, he would have dropped the atom bomb on them and their Chinese allies.

Incredibly, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea did emerge phoenix-like from the ashes of war with Kim Il Sung still in power. In the twenty years after the war it achieved what was by all accounts a miraculous economic recovery. The towns and cities were rebuilt. The countryside was revived. Industries were restored and expanded. The transport network was repaired. By the early seventies the DPRK had a very healthy economy by the standards of developing countries. It had achieved remarkable success, not only in terms of living standards but in creating an economy that was independent and to an extent immunised against the effects of first world recessions, unlike many developing countries, including quite prosperous ones, whose economies still depended on a few primary commodities to pay for imported goods, and whose industries were substantially owned by first world capital. The DPRK chose to minimise oil imports by exploiting its natural coal and water resources to generate power. It made its own cement. It made its own steel to make its own trains, trucks, and tractors. In spite of the fact that its terrain is predominantly mountainous and arable land scarce, it became virtually self-sufficient in food. It even managed to clothe its own population by inventing an anthracite-based synthetic fibre called vindon.

The reason this economic recovery has been described as miraculous is that it was accomplished from scratch with limited foreign aid and technical assistance. As well as being decimated by the war, the country had been subject for thirty-five of the previous forty years to Japanese colonial rule. Although there had been development during this period in line with Japanese interests, the bulk of the administration and technical expertise had been supplied by Japanese personnel. At the time of liberation in 1945, there was not a single institution of higher education in the North of Korea. So in 1953 there was a chronic shortage of professional and technical expertise to go with a ravaged countryside and a bombed-out industrial base.

Financial and technical assistance was forthcoming from the Chinese and the Soviets. There is no way that the North Koreans could have managed without it. However, the scale of assistance was limited due to Kim Il Sung's obstinate refusal to accept political conditions in return for aid. There were even times when his independent attitude led to a withdrawal of aid. From the outset of liberation from the Japanese, Kim Il Sung was determined that his country

was going to be fully independent and not a Soviet satellite like the Warsaw Pact countries, nor for that matter a client state of China either.

Another factor that must be taken into account in assessing the DPRK's achievement is that ever since the war it has felt it necessary to invest an extremely high proportion of its budget in military expenditure. If the Americans and the South Korean authorities are sincere in their expressed anxiety about possible aggression from the North, then the North is equally apprehensive about them. Technically the war is still in progress. No peace agreement has ever been signed, only an armistice.

I learned that the North Koreans had shown considerable ingenuity in accomplishing their economic miracle in the face of such daunting odds. I read how their scientists would, for example, take an imported tractor to pieces and reassemble it, identifying each part and working out how the parts linked together, until they were able to manufacture a tractor by themselves and to progress from there to the mass production of tractors and a fully fledged indigenous tractor industry.

The other ingredients for the economic miracle were discipline, organisation, frugal living and hard toil, which were guaranteed not by terror but by outstanding totalitarian organisation and ideological motivation supplied by the Workers' Party of Korea, under the apparently highly autocratic leadership of Kim Il Sung. It was known that there were purges of opposition factions, particularly in the fifties, but unlikely that they were carried out on a large scale, being confined to prominent public figures and not involving sections of the general public. Even in recent times it has not been unknown for recalcitrant ministers to be reported seriously injured or killed in road traffic accidents, which is odd because the DPRK has an extremely low volume of road traffic and, moreover, most of the roads in and around the capital tend to be very wide, having been planned in anticipation of an age of glorious prosperity that was expected to follow the rapid industrialisation of the fifties and sixties. I read that Kim Il Sung had secured his authority by gaining the unquestioning loyalty of the masses through a personality cult that exceeded those of Mao or Stalin, that he was always referred to as the Great Leader, and that he was about to establish the world's first communist dynasty by preparing for his son, Kim Jong Il, known as the Dear Leader, to succeed him.

I also read that since the great leap forward of the early post-war years, the rate of economic growth in the DPRK had slumped dramatically. If the economy was not totally stagnant it was lagging far behind the leading developing countries, which include South Korea. Although the DPRK had succeeded in building an independent national economy on its own heavy industrial base, further development was impeded by an acute shortage of hard currency. North Korea was able to supply its own population with all the basic necessities without relying on imports, but it was not producing quality goods to compete in the export market. Without adequate income from exports, it lacked the hard currency to import consumer luxuries and, more important, to buy access to the sophisticated new technology that has in recent years revolutionised industrial processes in the rest of the world, and without which their industry must become increasingly obsolete and their exports even less competitive. The country cut itself off from the normal channels of international monetary assistance by adopting a policy in the seventies of refusing to pay debts in time of difficulty instead of requesting reschedules. I gathered that the dilemma facing North Korea in the late nineteen eighties was how to gain access to the new technology to improve its economic performance without compromising its economic or political independence, and that the dilemma was all the more acute because the other Korea's economy, developed with American and Japanese capital, is booming.

Armed with such sketchy information, when I eventually arrived in Pyongyang, I found myself immeasurably better informed that the average North Korean citizen, who has been conditioned to believe that the Japanese capitulation in World War Two was precipitated not by what happened at Hiroshima but by the unstoppable advance of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army under its brilliant, iron-willed, ever-victorious commander, General Kim Il Sung, sun of the nation and lodestar of liberation, and that in 1950 they were not driven

headlong to the northern border by the UN forces. They were merely making a temporary strategic retreat as a result of which they quickly recovered the lost ground again, thanks to the outstanding military genius of the aforesaid commander. Certainly a number of Chinese volunteers did cross the border to lend comradely assistance, but this figure of one million must clearly be dismissed as US imperialist propaganda designed to cover up the ignominy of the mighty imperialist military machine being unequal to the confrontation with the valiant Korean people under the inspired leadership of Great General Comrade Kim Il Sung. As for South Korea today, everyone knows about the distressed living conditions of the working masses who long for the great leader's fatherly embrace, but are brutally suppressed by the US imperialists and the military fascist puppet dictatorship.

While I was reading up on North Korea and deciding that I would defer my appointment until after Christmas, I was in daily expectation of some official written communication regarding terms of contract, visas, and transport arrangements. Days turned into weeks and nothing happened. I began to think that I would never hear from North Korea again. Then one day came a phone call at work. "When are you coming to my country?" asked a funny little voice. "Why do you not come?" I explained that I did not have wings and if they wanted me to fly to their country, they had better send me an airline ticket and a visa. This was the start of a confusing and inconclusive conversation. There were two major barriers to communication. First of all, the person I was speaking to did not have a good command of English. The other barrier was that he was evidently incapable of understanding what my problem was. If he had ever heard of airline tickets, he had no idea that they might be quite expensive. He certainly did not know what a visa was. This was the first in a long series of ludicrous telephone calls I was to receive over the months to come.

I took the next initiative myself by writing to the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Pyongyang, my prospective employer, and explaining to them what arrangements they needed to make. I suggested that they make the arrangements through their embassy in Copenhagen. Among western capitalist countries, North Korea only had diplomatic relations with the Scandinavian countries and with Austria. There are no formal links at all with Britain.

Shortly afterwards the little men from Pyongyang rang me again at work, while I was out. They left a message that it would not be possible to make arrangements through their Copenhagen embassy, but that I should contact their consulate in Paris. Typically it never occurred to them that it might be helpful to let me have the Paris address or telephone number. I rang International Directory Enquiries but they had no listing for a North Korean consulate in Paris. I contacted Aidan Foster-Carter again and through him obtained the address of their permanent mission to UNESCO in Paris. I duly sent off another letter to Paris. This initiated a series of frustrating phone calls in French, a language of which I have only the flimsiest command, a fact which must have been instantly obvious to whoever I was speaking to.

By the time they had the sense to put me in communication with someone from Paris who spoke English, almost five months had elapsed since my initial contact from David Richardson. The original motivation for applying for such a ridiculous job had diminished and I was having serious doubts about the wisdom of going to this strange, remote, possibly sinister little country, which seemed to be administered by crazed and incompetent officials, in the unlikely event that they ever proved capable of arranging my passage. Consequently when the English speaker asked me if I would be willing to pay my own fare as far as Moscow on the understanding that I would be reimbursed on my arrival in Pyongyang, I told him that not only was this unacceptable but that too much time had now been wasted and I had no further interest in the post. He either failed to understand what I had said or for some obscure reason chose not to, and so the phone calls from Paris and Pyongyang continued. I played along with them, although I no longer entertained any serious intention of going, partly because they were a source of mild amusement, partly because against all common sense and better judgement I was still tempted by the prospect of doing something so extraordinarily unusual as going to work in North Korea. It was in this same spirit of keeping the game open and seeing what transpired that I filled in the visa application form which they finally sent me

at the beginning of June.

A couple of weeks later a situation in my personal life altered my mood so that I was in a receptive frame of mind when I picked up the phone one day and heard on the other end of the line a sane English voice. The voice belonged to Keith Bennett, political editor of the Asian Times. He was ringing to say that the Koreans in Paris had authorised him to buy me an airline ticket to Pyongyang, and did I still want to go. They had asked Keith to undertake the task of buying my ticket because he knew how to go about obtaining cheap air fares and could thus save the nation a few hundred precious dollars. This sort of thing is absolutely typical of the way this country of over twenty million people is run. It turned out that as well as being an authority on bucket shops, Keith was also a person who had been four times to North Korea. His answers to my questions about the place were on the whole encouraging. Before I knew where I was, I had handed in my notice at work.

I left Heathrow on the 11.30 am Aeroflot flight to Moscow on Sunday 23rd August, 1987. I picked up a connecting flight at Moscow and within twenty-four hours I was in Pyongyang. I arrived in Pyongyang in the early afternoon, Pyongyang time, on Monday 24th August. It was almost exactly a year to the day since I had submitted my application.

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Chapter Two

It is axiomatic that perceptions and judgements are influenced by mood and preconceptions. I once met a couple of British sociologists in Pyongyang's Koryo Hotel who were over for a conference. That day they had been taken on a visit to a co-operative farm. They conceded that it had been a nice outing. The peasants had been friendly and appeared happy and prosperous. The farm was modern and mechanised. They remained stubbornly unimpressed. They made the comments: You wonder what the rest of the farms are like. These people only let you see what they want you to see.

There is no questioning the validity of their observations. It certainly would have been a model farm they were taken to see. No country makes a point of displaying anything but its more favourable facets to its foreign visitors, but very few are as keen to keep foreigners on as tight a leash, or are as wary about what they might see and hear, as North Korea. It is a natural consequence that many foreign visitors tend to imagine that the underlying realities are very much worse than they actually are.

The fact remains, however, that those visitors came to North Korea with unfavourable preconceptions and were inclined to perceive everything they saw and experienced in a negative light. I saw the same process at work in another British visitor some weeks later. This one, however, was obliged to stay for a couple of months and was exposed to quite a lot of the life of the country. He finished up with a more respectful attitude to it, although being a normal, sensible, hedonistic western bourgeois, he vowed that it would take a million dollars for him to ever think of going back again.

For my part, I arrived in Pyongyang with a very positive attitude. I felt in need of a change in my life. I had never had an opportunity to live abroad before. I was looking forward to the experience of living in North Korea in terms of a personal challenge and an adventure, and I was keen to observe life in a socialist country. I had never been to one before. I have always inclined politically to the left. I was a member of the Labour Party, albeit a totally inert one. For more than ten years I had been earning my living as a local authority social worker. For the last eight of these years this had been in the context of Mrs Thatcher's savagely reactionary Tory government. Most of my work had involved me with the miseries and alienation of the people at the bottom of the capitalist heap, the lumpenproletariat, the social sub-class organically generated by the capitalist system to constitute a reserve labour pool and a stratum of poverty against which the labouring masses can measure themselves as affluent, even though their remuneration must always remain less than the value of their labour, while a privileged minority within the same society luxuriates on the profits the workers create. For most of my lifetime there had been a broad political consensus in my country that this innately unfair economic system should be persevered with because it was proving successful in generating prosperity and permitted a high degree of individual freedom; and besides, the process of drastic, fundamental change would incur more aggravation than it was worth. But it

was the responsibility of government to mediate the excesses of the capitalist system by placing limits on exploitation, and redistributing the nation's wealth through progressive taxation and the maintenance of what we call the welfare state. Under Thatcherism the policy has been to deliberately exacerbate the excesses of capitalism, to swell the ranks of the lumpenproletariat and reduce the living standards of this sub-class in order to depress wages, and to weaken the collective power of the working classes that has traditionally been expressed through the trade union movement, while eroding traditional notions about the responsibilities of privilege. I had not liked what I had seen of the results of this policy. Although by no means widely travelled, I had visited my share of the world's countries as a tourist, including a few developing ones. I had caught glimpses of what life was like for the dispossessed in economies of scarcity as well as in economies of affluence. I had come to the conclusion that the first essential goal for any society must be the rational exploitation and equitable distribution of its material resources. I considered, and still do, that such values as freedom of speech and movement may be very important but are still of secondary importance. I had read that in North Korea people had to have permits to travel even within the country. I was instinctively appalled by this, but I was aware that such a restriction would not have had much impact on the lives of quite a few people I had been visiting as a social worker. They had the right to go anywhere they pleased. They just did not have the money to exercise that right. All in all, my mood, values and preconceptions were going to incline me to be sympathetic in my perceptions of socialism in action in the third world.

It was hot and sticky the day I first set foot on North Korean tarmac. Summer temperatures in Pyongyang are no higher than England enjoys in a rare good year but humidity levels can verge on tropical. I was lucky it was not raining. The rain ignores Korea for the rest of the year but makes ample amends in the monsoon months of July and August.

Pyongyang's international airport is tiny. There is not a lot of air traffic to the DPRK: two scheduled flights a week from Moscow and Beijing respectively, and one from Khabarovsk. At the time of writing a new airport is under construction to be ready to receive an anticipated 20,000 participants in the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students due to be held in Pyongyang in July 1989, the first time the festival will have been staged in Asia, but a poor consolation prize in the prestige stakes in comparison to the Olympic Games.

There was nothing in the customs procedure to suggest I was about to be assimilated into a harsh, repressive, authoritarian regime. There was none of the three-minute glare you always get at passport control at Moscow Airport. The staff here seemed cheerful and relaxed. Nobody ransacked my luggage looking for seditious literature.

Mr Ming, the head of protocol from the publishing house, was at the airport with an interpreter to greet me. As we set off for my new home, I looked eagerly out of the car window. The picture that unfolded was of a bright, clean, attractive modern city. This was clearly not one of the world's chronic disaster areas. There were no crumbling slums like the ones I had seen a few months earlier on the drive from the airport into Alexandria. This was a world removed from the sights that shock on the road from Palam into Delhi or from Dum Dum into Calcutta. The roads were wide and lined with trees. There were interminable modern concrete apartment blocks but the balconies had been faced with pastel coloured tiles to make them more attractive, and it seemed that three-quarters of the inhabitants had decided to make their environment more cheerful by cultivating potted plants and flowers on their balconies. In the city centre were imposing public buildings of bright granite surrounded by statuary and fountains. Traffic was scarce but the people on the streets looked clean and well turned out in smart, attractive, western style clothes. Pyongyang in August did not present a grim scene of drab austerity, faceless people uniformly dressed. It was not Asia, seething, colourful, startling. It was mostly evocative of a nineteen fifties planner's idea of a model high rise council estate for the respectable working classes, except that here the people seemed to be behaving as the planners intended. No evidence of vandalism or graffiti in Pyongyang.

As I tried to familiarise myself with the image of Pyongyang, I inevitably found myself at the same time becoming very familiar with the image of its sponsor. I first saw him as I

stepped out of the plane. There is a mural on the façade of the airport building depicting his countenance as it was twenty years ago, looking rather sombre. I noticed that my two hosts displayed the same image on badges pinned to their chests, and then I noticed that all the rest of the population were wearing those badges too. I saw an enormous bronze statue of him on top of a hill, his right arm outstretched to indicate the path of the Korean revolution. Where we in the West would expect to see hoardings advertising cars and cigarettes and all the other consumer products we need to make us happy, in Pyongyang one sees posters and murals, but there is only one product on offer. There he is, always a head higher than everyone around him, receiving floral tributes from his adoring subjects, or on an inspection tour of a factory or, in homely vein, standing in a grocer's shop examining a large, exquisitely oval egg while the shop assistants and customers look up with misty eyes at the great father leader. And when we arrive at my new home, my little suite of rooms at the Ansan Chodasso, the Ansan Guest House, there he is on the wall of my study-bedroom watching over my rest and labours as he does for all his subjects with his customary warm solicitude, and there he is again in my living room. Considerations of modesty presumably inhibit him from intruding into my bathroom.

My arrival had been so long delayed that I had lost the distinction of being the first Briton in half a century to live in North Korea. Michael, a young graduate from Leeds University, had already been in residence at the Ansan Chodasso since March. He had heard about the job in the same way and at the same time as I had, but for some reason the Koreans had shown more efficiency in arranging his passage than they had mine.

I spent my first afternoon in Korea sleeping off the effects of jet-lag. I forced myself to get up again for dinner and afterwards Michael and I set out for our local, the nearby Potanggang Hotel, to celebrate my arrival. When we stepped out of the Ansan Chodasso that first evening, I was momentarily disorientated by the darkness. Our street, like most streets in Pyongyang, was equipped with street lights. However, for reasons of economy, they hardly ever switch them on. No sooner had my eyes become accustomed to the unfamiliar lack of light than I found myself stumbling in Michael's footsteps across a dusty construction site. Throughout my time in Pyongyang a major road bridge was under construction across a loop in the Potang River. The beginning of the bridge lay between our guest house and the Potanggang Hotel. They never cordoned off the construction site and there was always a path somewhere for pedestrians to get across it, but the route changed as the work advanced, sometimes from day to day. For the last few months of my stay the route led under the structure of the bridge. This was the first of many occasions that I was to pick my way, often in pitch darkness, sometimes blind drunk, across that construction site. Sometimes I fell over but I always made it. That night the Potanggang Hotel became my first stage on what was over the months to come to prove an increasingly sad little social circuit.

I was excused labour for the first two days after my arrival and taken to see the sights of the city. It was not an exacting schedule, a couple of hours in the morning, a couple in the afternoon. The first morning there was the inevitable visit to the President's fabled birthplace of Mangyondae. Luckily I had read about this previously and, being prepared in advance, I was able to maintain a polite exterior and keep my amusement to myself.

Mangyondae is situated a couple of miles outside Pyongyang on the banks of the Taedong River. It is said to be the place where the great leader was born into a humble peasant family and where he grew up until he left home at the age of thirteen to join up with the anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters in Manchuria. It should be noted that although his family were humble peasants, they were at the same time great patriots, thinkers and revolutionaries. Kim Il Sung's father, Kim Hyong Jik, is supposed to have been an influential leader of the national liberation movement against the Japanese occupation. It was none other than the great leader's great-grandfather, Kim Ung U, who led the successful assault on the predatory US battleship, the General Sherman, that infiltrated Korea up the Taedong River in 1866. We in the West do tend to forget just how far back US imperialist designs on the Korean peninsula actually go.

As any North Korean will tell you, you can't beat an outing to historic Mangyondae for a fun-packed day out for all the family. Set in several acres of lovely parkland, it offers first and foremost the original medieval thatched cottage where President Kim Il Sung spent his formative years. Why is it the only house left in the village? How did it escape the American bombing? Why does it look so much like a recently built model of an old-style Korean dwelling? It's a miracle. Miracles sit easily with some people. Think of Jesus. Presumably no such questions invade the minds of the hundreds and thousands of Koreans who are privileged to have the opportunity of paying homage at this shrine every year and gaze on the original farm implements and household utensils this humble but exceedingly worthy family used in the early years of this century. When they have had their fill of worshipping, they can ascend the hill and enjoy a very pleasant view of the river and of wooded hills. North Korea is an extremely picturesque country of lakes, rivers, trees and small mountains. The locals are extremely proud of their scenery. They also like to impose order and domesticity on it. The hill at Mangyondae is typical. There is a road up to the top. An attractive open pavilion in traditional style has been built on the summit and, as in nearly all scenic spots in the DPRK, concrete tables and benches have been neatly laid out for the comfort and convenience of the working people so that they can have a picnic. The working people take grateful advantage of these facilities and can be relied upon to clear away every scrap of refuse and detritus when they leave. The North Koreans have to be the cleanest and most orderly people in the world. It is impossible for me to judge, without having visited South Korea or having much knowledge of traditional Korean culture, to what extent this trait is a legacy of their cultural heritage and to what extent it has been drilled into them by the system. I suspect the latter because the need for cleanliness, tidiness and hygiene is an obsessive theme in the President's speeches in the early years.

When the visitors have satisfied their spiritual requirements by worshipping at the shrine and their aesthetic and gustatory requirements by picnicking among the natural splendours on the hill, they can round off a perfect day by spending the afternoon at North Korea's premier funfair, situated less than a mile from the shrine but discreetly out of view of it. All the rides have been imported from Japan. The star ride is a terrifying roller coaster with a double three-hundred-and-sixty-degree loop against which the hideous Corkscrew at Alton Towers in Derbyshire pales into insignificance. For a dreadful moment I thought I was going to be pressganged into taking a ride on it, but on this occasion I was spared.

In the afternoon I was taken to view Pyongyang's most notable monuments, the Arch of Triumph and the Tower of the Juche Idea. The Arch of Triumph turned out to be a virtual facsimile of the one in Paris, only Pyongyang's version is said to be slightly higher than the original and is inscribed with the dates 1925 and 1945 on either side of the arch. 1925 is the year when in the legend the great leader left home and family for Manchuria to join the struggle against the Japanese. 1945 is the year when he returned home in triumph, not of course as a major in the Red Army, but as supreme commander of the invincible Korean People's Revolutionary Army.

The Tower of the Juche Idea was officially unveiled on the President's 70th birthday in 1982. It is supposed to be the people's birthday present to their beloved leader as well as a symbol to posterity of the immortality of the great Juche idea, Kim Il Sung's idiosyncratic version of Marxist-Leninism, which for some reason is always rendered in English as the Juche Idea and not the Juche philosophy. The term Juche, roughly translated, means control of one's own body; it expresses North Korea's insistence on the importance of maintaining political and economic independence and on preserving its distinctive national culture and identity. The North Korean obsession with preserving autonomy probably has its roots in the experience of Japanese colonial rule. Apparently Japanese rule was very harsh and part of the colonialism programme was to eradicate all traces of Korean national culture and to replace Korean with Japanese as the national language. The obsession was subsequently reinforced by fears of becoming politically and economically subordinate to either of its powerful northern neighbours. I have been told by East European Korea experts that the emphasis on Juche and

the presidential personality cult really took off during the sixties at a time of strained relations with the other socialist countries.

The city of Pyongyang is situated at the confluence of the Taedong River and its tributary, the River Potang. Pyongyang is the administrative and cultural centre of the DPRK, and a city of light industry. The country's heavy industry bases are located elsewhere, most notably in the North eastern cities of Hamhung and Chongjin. In Pyongyang the banks of the Potang and Taedong Rivers are not lined with factories. They have been landscaped with trees and flowers to form attractive pleasure parks. Through the centre of the city flows the River Taedong, and at the very heart of the capital, central to the two principal bridges, the open expanse of Kim Il Sung Square is situated on the West bank, dominated by the Grand People's Study House, a genuinely impressive piece of architecture constructed in tiers, each tier surmounted by a traditional Korean blue-tiled hip-saddle roof. Directly opposite on the East bank stands the Tower of the Juche Idea, a tapering pillar of white granite blocks one hundred and seventy metres tall, capped by a big, blood-red plastic torch on a gilt plinth, which looks a bit tacky in the daylight but has a pleasantly eerie effect at night, when it glows like a sombre lighthouse in the Pyongyang sky - but only until ten o'clock when they have to switch it off to save electricity. There is a viewing gallery beneath the torch which commands a fine view of the city.

At the foot of the tower there is a perfectly monstrous bronze trio statue, thirty metres high and weighing thirty-three tons, comprising a beefy lady waving a sickle, a workman with a hammer and a man in a suit holding up a pen. These apparently signify worker, peasant and working intellectual, displaying "the spirit of our people forging vigorously ahead under the banner of the Party" (Korean Review, p.195). Significantly in their free hands all three figures are holding books. Workers and peasants are not permitted to be numbskulls in the brave new world of Juche. On either side of the tower extend immaculate gardens adorned with bright flowers, fountains, and more appalling statues. Pyongyang abounds in tasteless statuary, all of it produced not a hundred yards from the Ansan Chodasso at the Mansudae Arts Factory - none of these bourgeois individualists wrestling with their private visions in lonely studios in the DPRK.

Paradoxically, although quite a few of Pyongyang's public buildings, all of its statues and ninety per cent of its mosaics and murals fail to meet any accepted canons of good taste, the overall aesthetic impression of the city is actually quite pleasant. In fact by night on high days and holidays, when they are not economising on electricity and the ubiquitous multi-coloured neon lights are flashing from the façades of all the buildings and the fountains are in full flow, Pyongyang has a lot of charm.

It is a curious paradox, this discrepancy between the total aesthetic impact of Pyongyang and the sum of its parts. There are two reasons for it. First of all, it is a very green city. There are well tended trees and flowers everywhere. Consequently it is an infinitely more attractive city in the summer months than in the winter. Secondly, the public buildings and monuments are designed by essentially working-class architects and artists with essentially proletarian tastes, which they share with an essentially very unsophisticated public. I gather there was only a very small bourgeois class in the northern half of Korea at the time of liberation in 1945. Doubtless by 1953 many representatives of this class had taken the opportunity to migrate to the South amid the confusion of war. In the early years after his assumption of power, there are many allusions in the President's speeches to the need to temper suspicion of educated people as anti-revolutionary and erstwhile collaborators with the Japanese with understanding and fair treatment. So presumably many of his supporters were giving the old middle classes a tough time of it. Although the inhabitants of North Korea are an attractive and graceful people, theirs is a peasant grace and attractiveness. The ladies of Pyongyang, for example, have not lost the knack of gliding over the uneven pavements with awkward bundles nonchalantly poised on top of their heads. It is far more than the quality of their clothes that marks out at a glance the Korean expatriates visiting their homeland from Japan as belonging to a more civilized world than their native cousins. When one encounters a North Korean with

what we in the bourgeois countries would immediately identify as a middle-class manner and demeanour, it is rare enough as to be memorable. What you have then in North Korea is not inferior cultural objects being designed for a mass public in a condescending manner by people who personally have quite different tastes, as is the case with cheap commercial art in the West, but artists and craftsmen producing objects that they genuinely like for an appreciative public. Their sincerity and passion informs and redeems what ought to be irredeemable. The North Koreans taken on intense pride in what they perceive as the beauty of their reconstructed capital. They always refer to it as "ur Pyongyang", our Pyongyang. And the Tower of the Juche Idea, symbol of the single monolithic ideology that informs every aspect of life in the DPRK and is intended to do so for eternity, is their favourite monument. I sensed that my interpreter was a bit peeved when I seemed to be taking more interest in the surrounding gardens and fountains than in the tower itself.

"These are not good flowers," he said reproachfully as I stopped to admire a bed of exotic purple flowers. "We have much better flowers than these in the Botanical Gardens."

I was particularly attracted to the tunnel fountains that arch the terraces that lead down from the gardens to the embankment. These provide a great summer entertainment for the small children of Pyongyang. The game is to duck down low and try and race from one end of the tunnel to the other without getting wet. It is a game whose failure brings its own rewards. They always seemed to regard getting drenched from head to toe as a wonderful joke. If their parents were likely to get cross with them when they got home, the prospect did not appear to worry them. It is virtually an official party policy in the DPRK that children are the kings and queens of the country, and the kids always struck me as being cheerfully aware of their elevated status.

The following morning I was taken to the Museum of the Korean Revolution. This turned out to be a monster. In the words of the official handbook, it is "a great immortal monument of the Korean revolution, an edifice dedicated to the education in the Juche idea. It contains priceless historical mementoes and material illustrating graphically the glorious revolutionary history, enduring revolutionary services, wise guidance and lofty qualities of the great revolutionary leader Comrade Kim Il Sung, peerless patriot, national hero, ever-victorious, iron-willed, brilliant commander and one of the outstanding leaders of the international communist and working-class movements."

The museum is situated in a prominent position at the top of Mansudae Hill. It has ninety rooms and a floor space of over 50,000 square metres, which makes it a hell of a big museum to cover barely sixty years in the history of one small nation from the time that the great leader set out to meet his tryst with destiny to the present day. Slap bang in the middle in front of the building there is an enormous bronze statue of the man himself. There is at least one in every major town. On either side of the president's statue are two huge sprawling group bronzes, each consisting of well over a hundred life-size figures. One depicts soldiers fighting for the liberation of Korea, the other the civilian masses hard at work building the socialist construction. The façade of the building itself is devoted to a large mosaic of Lake Chon, the deepest mountain lake in the world. Lake Chon occupies a vast crater that was created by the last volcanic eruption of Mount Paekdu, a sprawling mountain in the extreme North of Korea near the Manchurian border. It occupies a special place in the mythology of the Korean revolution. Being high, remote, bitterly cold and densely forested, it was a suitable stronghold for the guerrilla movement in which Kim Il Sung played his part in the nineteen thirties. Legend has it that the dear leader, Kim Jong Il, was born there in a humble log cabin in 1942. The truth is that he was born in rather more salubrious surroundings in the Soviet Union. Lake Chon, as Mount Paekdu's most distinctive feature, is depicted all over the place in North Korea. The massive entrance hall of the museum is notable for a particularly large and gruesome example of the murals that dominate the main hall or entrance of just about every public building of any size in the DPRK. This one portrays him in his fatherly Marshal role standing in the forefront of his smiling constituents, holding the hand of a little boy in his right hand and with his left arm draped round a little girl's shoulder.

I was relieved to hear that I was not going to be conducted round the whole of the museum. My tour would be confined to an inspection of the first twenty-six rooms, the rooms dedicated to material associated with the years of struggle against the Japanese colonial rule. I was further reassured when it became apparent that my English speaking guide was going to conform to a pattern that I already recognised as being typically North Korean of reciting her lines mechanically while leading me at a brisk pace from one room to the next. It was like being on a conveyor belt. You were naturally expected to look and listen but you were not invited to linger or ask questions. I was not going to be late for lunch.

In the event I could not resist interrupting her flow with a couple of banal questions just to test whether this attractive young woman really was as fluent in English as she sounded. Even her pronunciation was excellent. But her delivery was just so mechanical one had the feeling that she might have learned the one long recital off by heart and that was the extent of her knowledge of the English language. She had no difficulty in answering my questions and showed that she was indeed the master of at least one foreign language and quite intelligent generally. This left me wondering whether she could really believe in what she was saying, or if a lifetime's exposure to continuous propaganda had so blunted her critical faculties as to render her incapable of realising that she was not working in a museum of history at all, but in a temple dedicated to the worship of a mythological demigod. It would be wrong of me to exaggerate the grossness of the contents of the Korean Revolution Museum.

The first text I was given to revise after my arrival in Pyongyang purported to be a memoir of the days of anti-Japanese struggle. I never subsequently saw it in print so they must have wisely decided later that it was not suitable for foreign consumption. It explicitly stated in this book that it was not the atomic bombs that brought the Japanese to surrender but the inexorable southward advance into the homeland of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army. The Red Army does get a mention but in such a way as to suggest that it was playing an auxiliary role in the invasion.

There was no attempt in to museum to perpetrate such huge lies.

There was a guerrilla resistance movement against the Japanese in the northern border area of Korea and in South Manchuria, in which Kim Il Sung took part. No doubt in 1937 he did lead a band of guerrillas who succeeded in establishing temporarily a liberated zone in the remote fastnesses of Mount Paekdu. A whole room is devoted to a diorama of a tiny battle that took place in a little border down called Pochonbo, for the guerrillas a brilliant success but scarcely a pinprick to the Imperial Japanese Empire. No elaborate explanation was attempted as to how this hardy but basically insignificant guerrilla outfit was supposed to have succeeded in expelling the Japanese in 1945. No overt lies were told. Merely economy with the truth. The Red Army and Hiroshima were omitted from the story which was, moreover, reduced to the story of one man. Of all the other Koreans who had the courage to take up arms against the Japanese oppressor, only a handful qualify for an honourable mention in despatches and the only qualities they are credited for are bravery, patriotism and, above all, boundless loyalty to the great leader.

The only celebrity from those years who is granted more than a passing mention is that "indomitable woman revolutionary fighter", Comrade Kim Jong Suk. Kim Jong Suk was the first wife of Kim Il Sung and mother of the dear leader. She has been dead for nearly forty years. This makes her a doubly suitable subject for revolutionary canonisation. She has her own special shrine on the lines of Mangyondae at her home village of Hoenyong, up in the North of the country. She also occupies pride of place in the revolutionary martyrs' cemetery, another important sacred revolutionary site, on Mount Taesong on the outskirts of Pyongyang.

Ludicrous as it was, I found my outing to the Museum of the Korean Revolution most entertaining. That afternoon, the sanity and normality of the Korean Central History Museum, a much smaller establishment dealing with the previous two or three thousand years of Korean history, came as a dull anti-climax.

It was later that afternoon that I had my first negative experience of Korea. Mr Ming came to the Ansan Chodasso with an interpreter to discuss my terms of service. I assumed this was

going to be a formality and at first everything he said tallied with the information on the job description I received with my application form. I would be working a forty-five hour week, eight hours a day Monday to Friday and five hours on Saturday morning. I would receive free board and lodging. I would receive a free packet of tipped Korean cigarettes every day. My fridge would be daily replenished with supplies of fruit, soft drinks and mineral water. I would be taken on trips from time to time to places of interest outside Pyongyang. Then he offered me just over half the advertised salary.

I felt as if I had been given an electric shock. I had given up a secure job in England and flown out to the other side of the world. I had no money to fly back again, and even if I had, North Korea is not a country where you can just saunter down to the local travel agency and book yourself a flight. I still entertained a few groundless fears and misgivings about the country based on the sinister image it has in the West. And here I was stranded in Pyongyang, being offered a totally inadequate sum of money. At a loss for words, I stood up and fetched from my drawer the job description I had received in England and pointed to the salary explicitly stated on it. I emphasised that I would never have dreamed of applying for the job on the basis of anything less.

They argued that there had been a mistake. The salary they had advertised was what they paid to experienced revisers who had been with them for some years. I had only just arrived. They did not yet know what my capabilities would be. They told me that both Michael and Jean-Jacques, the young French reviser, were working on the lower salary. I replied that their situations were quite different from mine and that if there had been a mistake, it was their mistake and not mine. I had applied for a job on the basis of the salary they had actually advertised and nothing less. In the end, they asked me to work on the lower salary for the first month. They asked to borrow the job description I had received. They said they would have to show it to the publishing house hierarchy but I could rest assured the matter would be sorted out satisfactorily. In the circumstances I reluctantly agreed to this arrangement.

It was then that I had my only ever first-hand encounter with graft and corruption in the DPRK. The interpreter asked me if I had brought any English or American cigarettes with me. He said that Mr Ming had said that if he was going to advance my cause at the publishing house a packet of imported cigarettes would not go amiss. It seemed a modest enough bribe. I came to realise later that Mr Ming had said no such thing. The interpreter had taken advantage of the fact that Mr Ming did not speak a word of English, on the correct assumption that if I gave Mr Ming a pack of cigarettes I would give him one too. Poor Mr Ming would have been outraged if he had known what was being said on his behalf, but as he thought the cigarettes were an unsolicited gift, he accepted them gratefully.

North Koreans are expected to maintain very high standards of personal honesty. Their code is so strict that it is unacceptable for taxi drivers, barmaids and waitresses to accept tips. During the time I was there gaping cracks began to appear in the code but at the time I arrived the majority still adhered to it. This interpreter's soliciting of cigarettes from me was, I later learned from other revisers who knew him well, quite characteristic of him and most uncharacteristic of other Koreans up to that time. Shortly after my arrival he was sent off much to his chagrin to work in one of the country's enterprises in West Africa.

Many Koreans do not relish the prospect of an overseas posting. Just as most foreigners find life in the DPRK insupportable because it is so different from the rest of the planet, so many North Koreans have difficulty in adjusting when they are thrown into the outside world. The consensus of opinion was that the authorities had become aware of his little idiosyncrasies and being sent abroad was his punishment. It seemed a harsh penalty for the sort of behaviour which in the rest of the world would have been classed as mere mischievousness. On the other hand, giving somebody a job which no-one wanted is not on a par with sending a chap to a labour camp in Siberia. Whatever else North Korea may be, it is not that sort of society.

It was fully a month before Mr Ming returned to see me again and told me that they would pay the proper salary, although he did contrive to squeeze a couple more weeks out of me at

the reduced rate. I had not been overly anxious. By then I had realised that they would fly me straight back home again if I insisted, and that would be a very bad investment for them. I also realised there never had been any mistake in the salary quoted. It was just that they had subsequently found a couple of young men who had been prepared to work for them for substantially less so they thought they would try out the same trick on me. Mr Ming's gesture of borrowing the job description to show to his superiors at the publishing house was just a ruse to save face and at the same time save the publishing house a few hundred dollars. He then deliberately made me wait as long as possible in the hope that I would back down and retract my demand. In this respect the traditional spirit of Asia is still alive in the DPRK, the spirit of the bazaar where prices are not fixed but reached by a process of bargaining. The difference is that in other Asian countries bargaining is now confined to the bazaar. The North Koreans have yet to learn that it is no way to do business with the outside world in the late twentieth century.

At the time I was inclined to be philosophical about being underpaid for a few weeks. The sense of adventure at being somewhere as unusual as North Korea had not yet worn off and my initial impressions of the country were almost unconditionally favourable, to such an extent that I began a letter to a friend in those early days, "Fraternal greetings from Chosen, land of morning calm and dawn of new home for mankind." Well . . . Chosen incidentally is what the Koreans call their country, and means land of morning calm. The name Korea, by which the rest of the world knows it, derives from Koryo, the name of the largest and most powerful of three feudal kingdoms which occupied the territory of Korea in the middle ages.

It was difficult at the worst of times to sustain much animosity for long against the North Koreans. They are such kind, gentle people. Besides, although I was blind to a lot of things at first, I was not blind to the fact that although they had abolished squalor the country was poor, and that by Korean standards the salary that I rejected was a King's ransom.

Why was I initially so enamoured of this society as to perceive it as representing a potential new dawn for mankind? First of all, I brought to Pyongyang a very positive and sympathetic attitude. I also came with a firm belief that the principal objective of any society ought to be the rational exploitation and equitable distribution of its material resources.

From the perspective of such an attitude and belief, I observe this obscure little country that was in total ruins less than forty years ago. It is evidently still a poor country. There are few cars on the road and most of them are old. Some of them date back to the fifties. They have installed street lamps but for reasons of economy they do not use them. For reasons of economy they only supply cold water to domestic premises in the summer months. The people do not wear expensive clothes. They form long queues for dilapidated buses and trolley buses which are forever breaking down and which become as crowded and congested as the trams in Calcutta - except that in Pyongyang people refrain from clambering onto the roof or hanging from the windows. The shops and stores are sad places offering a narrow range of unexciting goods.

Nevertheless, there is no squalor. There is no immediate indication of abject poverty. Everybody is adequately provided with food, shelter, and clothing. This is no mean achievement. How many thousands are homeless in Britain in 1988? There is an eleven-year free compulsory education system. There is free health care. The world's nastier epidemic diseases have been eradicated there. Pyongyang is so clean and neat and, for the most part, odourless as a stockbroker suburb. I know that all the apartment blocks were provided with a centralised central heating system. I did not yet know how inefficient it could be. Nevertheless, Pyongyang is not a place where old people die of hypothermia when the January temperatures reach twenty below as they regularly do. The DPRK seemed to me a society which had its priorities right. I was impressed. I should add that to a considerable extent I still am. Initially I estimated that the people were enjoying a low European standard of living. Later I had to revise this estimate far, far downwards.

Not only does Pyongyang score high marks for cleanliness, it is also the world's safest city. Anyone, male or female, can walk the unlit streets at any hour of the day or night with as

much fear of being robbed or molested as in a Shropshire village on a wet Thursday afternoon. There is some crime of course, and the indications are that it is one the increase, but the rate is tiny by world standards. There may well be a draconian penal code in force. That is not the sort of thing that is easily found out. There are plenty of policemen about. I did not realise this at first because the police uniforms are indistinguishable from those of the soldiers, except that the police wear green collar tabs while the soldiers wear red. However, Pyongyang definitely does not have the oppressive atmosphere of a police state. The people conform partly because they are very closely supervised but largely because they have been very thoroughly conditioned.

But what impressed me more than anything else during these early weeks in Pyongyang was the people. During my years as a social worker I formed an intimate acquaintance with the psychological effects of failure within the capitalist system, a system in which it is structurally inherent that some people must fail, a system that currently operates in my country in such a way that rather a lot of people fail rather badly. Strictly in material terms, the giro recipients whom I used to visit on the meaner council estates and in the run-down inner city areas of Leeds were affluent by the standards of nearly all North Koreans. But it is not ultimately the material deprivation that erodes the soul and extracts the joy from living. It is the concomitant alienation, the boredom, the sense of helplessness, above all the lack of self-esteem. When people are trapped in circumstances in which it is impossible for them to define themselves through their actions in ways that will obtain for them adequate confirmation that they are successful human beings, the inevitable consequence is that they feel bad about themselves. People who feel bad about themselves tend to behave badly or become apathetic and let themselves slide. People manifest their inner selves in their appearance and behaviour. You do not have to talk to dispossessed people in Britain to know that many of them are not getting their fair share of joy from life. You only have to look at them.

You only have to look at the citizens of Pyongyang to know that they feel OK about themselves. They take good care of their appearance. Their clothes may be few and simple but they wear them with pride. They take a keen interest in their hairstyles partly, I expect, because visiting one of Pyongyang's innumerable hairdressing salons is one of the leading unorganised social activities available in what to anyone who knows any different is an unbearably dull life. The people carry themselves well. There is a society in which everyone is assigned a role to play, everyone has something to do and somewhere to go, but no-one is, under normal circumstances, in too much of a rush. When I first arrived, fresh from the European pace of life, I kept finding my progress along the pavements held up by sauntering groups of Koreans. Gradually over the weeks I fell into the local rhythm. The people have an air of unassuming dignity. They are told that they are masters of the state and of society. By any reasonable criteria this is an enormous con, but they believe it. They are taught that everything in the society exists for them and belongs to them. They are a very likeable people. They are gentle, courteous, friendly and considerate. The girls who cleaned my rooms, served my meals, served me beer in the hotel bars, exemplified all these virtues, but without undue servility or deference. The doorman at the plush Koryo Hotel used to politely nod and say good evening when I arrived and if I asked him to he would efficiently rustle up a taxi for me when I left, but he would always look me in the eye and never address me as sir. Sometimes at the end of his shift he would go up to the first floor, still in his uniform, and play pool with the guests. I question whether a doorman at, say, the London Hilton would have the confidence to do that even if it was permitted.

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