

North Korea

My visit to North Korea,
one of the most isolated countries
in the world (2007)

Mary Connor (co-founder of National
Korean Studies, author, and educator)

Background Information about North Korea

- After the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the Soviet Union invaded Korea with a plan to take over the entire Korean Peninsula.
- In order to prevent a communist takeover of the Peninsula, the United States divided Korea without consulting the Korean people. The thought was that this plan would only be temporary and in the future Korea would be unified.
- This decision divided a nation that had been unified since 668 C.E. The Peninsula remains divided.

The Korean War

- 1950–53
- Cold War struggle and a civil war
- Massive destruction
 - 3 million dead
 - Infrastructure destroyed
 - Division remains
 - The issues of the war continue – no formal ending to the war – only an armistice

North Korea (DPRK)

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea

- Founded 1948
- Kim Il Sung 1948-1994 (Great Leader)
- Kim Jong Il 1994-2011 (Dear Leader)
- Kim Jong Un 2011- (Supreme Leader)
- Until the 1990's North Korea was dependent on the Soviet Union. The loss of Soviet support combined with economic mismanagement led to a decline in food production and international trade. These factors combined with devastating floods led to the deaths of possibly as many as 3.5 million people.
- North Korea received significant international humanitarian assistance through the United Nations, China, South Korea, and the United States.

North and South Korea

■ Size (Korean Peninsula)

- 84,747 sq miles

So. Korea – 38,000 sq. miles

No. Korea – 46,400 sq. miles

■ Population (Korean Peninsula)

- 76 million Koreans
- No. Korea – 25 million
- South Korea – 51 million

Population – Seoul 10 million/ Pyongyang 3 million

Comparing North and South Korea

- South Korea- Democratic with three branches of government.
North Korea- Highly centralized communist state.
- South Korea- Literacy 97.9 and North Korea 100 percent
- South Korea-GDP per capita-\$34,907
- North Korea-GDP per capita-\$1,300 estimate
- South Korea Industries- electronics, automobiles, ships, mining and manufactures.
- North Korea Industries- military products, machine building, and chemicals.
- South Korea exports: \$683 billion. North Korea-\$1,624 billion

Life in North Korea

- Leaders are glorified. Their photographs are in all public places. Everyone must have a photograph of Kim Il Sung in their home.
- Building on Confucian traditions, the leaders of North Korea have stressed that loyalty to the leader is the most essential virtue. Children are to transfer their loyalty from their parents to the leaders and the state.
- North Korea has created a collective spirit, which calls for self-sacrifice and strict discipline in the interest in loyalty to the leader and the state. All basic liberties, including free speech, assembly, association, and religion are denied.
- While South Korea has one of the most advanced economies in the world, North Korea has a military dictatorship that strictly controls the economy and supports *Juche*, a policy of self-reliance as a nation. North Korea is ranked fourth in the world in terms of its number of military for the size of the population.

Pyongyang

- The capital of North Korea is a well-ordered city carefully designed to glorify national founder Kim Il Sung and to promote socialism. It is also the political, cultural, and educational center of the nation. Huge sterile buildings resemble Soviet architecture. Monuments, statues and photographs in public buildings glorify their leaders throughout the city.
- North Koreans know that they cannot talk to visitors as it is too dangerous to do so. The city is very quiet. The sounds I heard were usually the voices of children.

What do the following photographs tell us about life in North Korea?

- Information about the photographs will appear after the 36th photograph is viewed. Discussion questions will follow along with a recommendation for viewing a fascinating documentary about North Korea's Mass Games.
- In order to prepare for this lesson on North Korea, I suggest that educators first read the entire PowerPoint lecture. Carefully study my comments on the photographs and if you have time take some notes so you will be able to add to what students say. Watch the eight minute documentary (*A State of Mind*) about North Korea's Mass Games. After the students comment on what they learn from each photograph, the teacher should add additional information provided by my experience travelling in North Korea. Discussion questions appear at the end.

The DMZ and Our Host



Pyongyang Airport



Sunrise in Pyongyang



The Arch of Triumph







위대한 수령 김일성동지는 영원히 우리와 함께 계신다

Kim Il-Sung's home in life and death



Grand Peoples' Study House





Metro, Pyongyang



Juche Tower



The Taedong River





Pyongyang Traffic Policewoman









Books for Sale



Store in Pyongyang



North Korean Countryside







Entering Kaesong



Kaesong



Kaesong Housing















Children's Palace



Children's Palace Performance



Border of North & South Korea



The Armistice





Information about Slides

- 1. No visitor can tour North Korea on their own. Everyone is always supervised everywhere either by someone in the military or a minder (someone who is trained by the government to carefully supervise visitors)
- 2. The Pyongyang airport is a very small for a city that has more than three million people. Our suitcases, purses, and cell phones were examined. Our minder had done research about me on our seminar website. When he asked me specific questions, I was terrified. Very few people visit North Korea and few leave. If a North Korean escapes, their entire family will be punished. If captured, one risks death or imprisonment.
- 3. The photograph of Pyongyang reveals the character of the city and Soviet architecture.
- 4. A statue that glorifies Kim Il Sung.

Information about photographs

5. The Arch of Triumph commemorates Korean resistance to Japanese occupation that existed from 1910 to 1945.
6. Glorification of Kim Il Sung who is holding a child.
7. Kim Il Sung's home in life and in death.
8. Grand People's Study House and image of Kim Il Sung.
9. Students studying. Note pictures of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il.
10. The Metro station provides the main source of transportation.
11. Juche Tower promotes self-reliance as a nation.
12. The Taedong River runs through the city of Pyongyang.
13. Most people either walk, bike or ride the Metro. There are few cars in Pyongyang as people cannot afford them.

Information about photographs

14. It is a real accomplishment to be a traffic policewoman, but there is virtually no traffic for her to direct.
15. Pyongyang is not a colorful city. It is a very dreary place and very quiet. When I heard voices, they were usually the voices of children.
16. More glorification of leaders and the nation.
17. The apartments are old and unattractive.
18. The government determines what is written in books and controls all content on the radio and television.
19. This is probably the best store in Pyongyang. The employees were very proud of the store and their merchandise , but the supplies were very limited.

Information about photographs

20. A typical country village
21. An animal drawn cart photo vividly shows the backwardness of North Korea.
22. Traditional farming methods
23. Glorification of Kim Il Sung
24. Kaesong is a unattractive city with poor housing and poverty.
25. Old unattractive housing
26. The man on the bike looks very tired and malnourished.
27. Another example of North Korea's lack of modernization. The national priority is to develop nuclear weapons for defense and to prepare for a possible war.
28. Impoverished children
29. Woman in traditional dress (hanbok) and Arch of Triumph.

Information about Photographs

- 30. The children were fascinated as they had never seen a cell phone. They were thrilled to see their photographs. Some of the children looked like they were malnourished.
- 31. North Korean girls wearing Kim Il Sung pin and red scarf's to show that they are good communists.
- 32. All children must wear the required clothing to show that they are good communists. Their performances were spectacular.
- 33. All performances were perfect and showed that they are disciplined and loyal to their leaders and their nation.
- 34. The picture was taken at the dividing line between the Koreas.
- 35. A photograph of the Korean War Armistice.
- 36. Photograph of soldier who does not look very friendly.

Additional Information about North Korea

- Our group stayed in huge hotels, but we were basically the only guests. We could never be on our own as our guides were always with us.
- Our Korean guides spoke perfect English.
- When we went to restaurants, we were always the only people.
- The food was acceptable, but revealed limited food supplies and spices.
- We had to be careful of what we photographed or our phones were taken from us. They were returned, but the photographs were deleted.
- North Korea supports Juche (self-reliance), but the television in my room was manufactured in South Korea, the hair dryer was from France, and the bedspread was made in Russia.

Why did I travel to North Korea?

- I had signed a contract to be the editor of *Asia in Focus: The Koreas*. Since I had traveled to South Korea several times, I needed to travel to North Korea to be more informed. I had also become fascinated by viewing *A State of Mind*, a documentary about North Korea's Mass Games. The film dramatically conveys how an authoritarian regime has shaped the minds of the people. The film focuses on two delightful teenage girls who are selected to train for the Mass Games and whose lives revolve around a daily routine to prepare for the Games in hopes that the Dear Leader will see them perform and know that they are good communists. The shots of the Mass Games show 100,000 people participating in an elaborately choreographed exhibition of dazzling colorful and perfectly synchronized routines. It is impossible to forget these images.

A State of Mind

- *A State of Mind* is available on Amazon Prime.
- There are at least five short videos on YouTube (Google search” *A State of Mind* (North Korea). The eight minute video is excellent and will captivate students.
- https://www.google.com/search?q=A+State+of+Mind%2C+North+Korea%27s+Mass+Games&rlz=1C1SQJL_enUS885US885&oq=A+State+of+Mind%2C+North

Questions for Discussing the Documentary

- In what ways are the two girls very different from America children their own age? In what ways might they be similar?
- What do you learn about life in Pyongyang after viewing the slides and watching videos?
- Explain how the Mass Games inculcate in each performer the ethos of the group over the individual.
- Describe the beauty as well as the disturbing elements of the Mass Games?
- What understanding do you have of communism, *juche*, and totalitarian rule as the result of watching this film?

Questions for Discussion

- What elements of Confucianism exist in North Korea?
- What might be the benefits to a society of emphasizing the individual over the group? What are the benefits of emphasizing the individual over the group?
- What will you remember from watching and discussing this documentary?
- What will you remember about the difference between autocratic government and democracy?
- (A perfect companion to this video is *The Son* by North Korean writer Kim Pukhyang in *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology* (edited by Bruce Fulton)