

PYONGYANG PROUDLY PRESENTS: MASS DISPLAYS AND DISPLAYS OF THE MASSES IN NORTH KOREA

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Introduction

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the right to host the 1936 Olympic Games to Berlin before the Nazis came to power in 1933. The politicians of Germany's democratic and liberal Weimar Republic (1918–1933) had hoped to celebrate the emergence of a democratic German state and its re-admittance to the European community of nations after its isolation in the aftermath of the First World War. Instead Adolf Hitler and Josef Göbbels, his Propaganda Minister, used the Games to celebrate the ongoing destruction of that system, to improve their international reputation and to substantiate their claims of racial superiority. Ironically, the four gold medals won by the black American athlete Jesse Owens revealed the Nazi's doctrine of the morally and physically superior Aryan race as obviously mistaken. Despite this, most contemporary commentators view the 1936 Olympics as "one of the great public relations coups of all time" (Coe *et al.*, 1992: p. 127). Houlihan argues that "Hitler and the Nazi Olympics showed just how pliable sport was during the Berlin Games where almost every aspect of the Games was manipulated to enhance the prestige of the Third Reich and national socialism (1994: p. 11). Horne *et al.* (1999) suggest that the "politicisation of the modern Olympics took a quantum leap in 1936 with the staging of the 11th Olympiad in Berlin" (p. 194).

In Stalinist Russia at the same time, i.e. in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the politicization of sport and physical culture was very different. Young people were given educational and recreational opportunities in order to improve the quality of their lives and, more importantly, to forge their Socialist consciousness and strengthen loyalty to party, state and leader. Involvement of Russian athletes in international competitions

was, however, very limited as Soviet sportsmen and women could only compete with athletes of the 'Red Sport International' that had been founded in 1922 as a branch of the 'Komintern' (the Communist International). This self-imposed isolation of the Soviet Union made it difficult for the country to use international sport competitions as an ideological and political weapon in international relations. Since the Soviet Union regarded itself as a progressive society, qualitatively very different from Capitalist societies, participation and excellence in physical culture and sport were frequently on the agenda of the most influential political committees. One outcome of these intense ideological deliberations was a clear rejection of the Capitalist concept of sport which was believed to be an alienating experience for the individuals involved due to the exaggerated importance of competitiveness, the achievement principle, individualism, winning, and the resulting hierarchies — all embodying the spirit of Capitalism. As physical education was recognized as a powerful tool and a constituent component of Communist education the development of sport groups, communities and clubs, usually referred to as 'Physical Culture Collectives', was widely promoted. From the late 1920s the state increasingly took charge of all physical culture affairs encouraging physical hygiene, discipline and training of the Socialist body and promoting an alternative model to bourgeois sport.

Parallel with the Sixth Congress of the 'Comintern' in 1928 the Soviet Union hosted its first major international sport event, the 'Spartakiad', in Moscow. The intention of this event was to show how far Russian athletes had progressed, to display the revolutionary nature of the country's physical culture system and to publicly question the values underpinning the Olympic Games that were held at the same time in Amsterdam. The Soviet 'Spartakiades' were "to be distinguished from the Olympics by the inclusion of military events, folk dances and noncompetitive pageants", although "the core of the program ... was the same as that of the Olympics" (Edelmann, 1993: p. 38). A full tourism and cultural programme was provided for the visiting worker athletes, including excursions to the countryside and guided tours of factories, schools, hospitals and other institutions representing the achievements of the Russian revolution. The image presented was one of "a happy people living in an almost perfect society driven by powerful collectivist and internationalist feelings together with a strong identification with the political system" (Arnoud and Riordan, 1998: pp. 197–8). Surprisingly, a small number of Western journalists attended the 1928 'Spartakiad' that provided a rare glimpse of Soviet sport to the outside world. Furthermore, every year young athletes from all over the Soviet Union would march on May Day and saluting their leaders and declaring their allegiance. These theatrically orchestrated 'Physical Culture Days'



Illustration 1/2 The two Kims are everywhere — portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il: (above) in private spaces and (below) in public, as this rendition in mosaic tiles

[Note: all photographs in this chapter were taken by Udo Merkel]

comprised elaborate parades through Moscow's Red Square as well as "mass gymnastic displays, bizarre and idiosyncratic floats, and omnipresent portraits of Stalin" (Edelmann, 1993: p. 43). All these scripted mass events offered a conceptual and practical alternative to the 'bourgeois' multi-sport events of the Olympic movement: togetherness and discipline highlighted a healthy sense of self firmly based in a strong and coherent community without sacrificing participants' individuality. Eventually, along with the Soviet Union itself, these alternative 'sport' events disappeared from the face of the earth with the sole exception of North Korea where they did not only survive but most recently have experienced an unprecedented second blossoming.

Like the political elite of the former Soviet Union, the North Korean regime has always taken "great pride in its truly awesome choreographed mass marches through the great central square in Pyongyang, with literally a million people marching in step in fifty parallel columns" (Cumings, 2004: p. 137). Since 1946, the country has also more or less regularly staged mass gymnastic games. However, since the beginning of this millennium, these performances have grown grander, more lavish and prominent, and have attracted international media and tourist attention¹. "True to the North's way of doing nothing by half, it dwarfs anything seen even during the heyday of the far more prosperous communist regimes of the former eastern bloc" (Watts, 2002).

Prior to the detailed analysis of these mass games the next section will briefly summarise significant socio-historical, economic, and political milestones in recent Korean history that have shaped the current experiences and existence of the North Korean nation. Of particular importance, obviously, is the division of the Korean people and the ongoing debates about reunification.

Living in a Cold War Museum

Korea's² annexation by Japan lasted from 1910 to 1945. Subsequently, American and Soviet troops occupied the country and helped establish governments sympathetic to their respective ideologies and leaders, ultimately resulting in the current political division and the existence of two Korean states: the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south, founded 15 August 1948, hosting a population of 48 million, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north, established three weeks later on 9 September 1948, with 23 million people. Shortly after the two superpowers pulled out most of their forces, North Korea invaded South Korea starting the Korean War (1950–1953)³. After a truce was signed with the North, a demilitarized zone (DMZ) was established along the thirty-eighth parallel and has separated the two countries from conflict

since. The two countries never signed a peace treaty (Blair, 1987; Cumings, 2005: 139–298; Zhang, 1995).

In the six decades since Korea was divided much has changed. The economic miracle in South Korea is well documented and widely studied (Hwang, 1993; Ogle, 1990; Woo, 1991). Following the Japanese model of export-oriented growth, production grew dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s and the South still maintains an annual average real growth rate of over five percent (Amsden, 1989). Despite a severe recession following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, South Korea today enjoys a robust and healthy economy (Cumings, 2005: pp. 299–341).

The Japanese occupation of Korea in the first half of the twentieth century left the North with greater industrial capacity, but much of this was destroyed by the Korean War. During the Cold War, the North frequently exploited the animosities between its two main benefactors, the Soviet Union and China, and achieved astonishing progress in standards of living. However, since the demise of the Soviet Union things have changed for the worse: most of the markets for North Korean products have all but disappeared. In addition, famines have repeatedly swept through the country in recent years, caused by a combination of unfortunate weather conditions and inadequate agricultural management policies. Aid agencies have estimated that up to two million people have died since the mid 1990s because of acute food shortages. While the South has continued to grow and now enjoys per capita GDP on a par with those of many developed nations, the North has slowly slid into poverty. South Korea trades heavily with the rest of the world, whilst North Korea is isolated and its economy bears a remarkable resemblance to the old Korea with its closed borders and reluctance to deal with outsiders (Cumings, 2005: pp. 404–47). Largely responsible for this is Kim Il Sung, North Korea's "Eternal Leader", who was driven by the search for a pre-modern Korean ideal, an autarkic Hermit Kingdom. Although Kim Il Sung died in 1994 and (after three years of mourning) was replaced by his son, Kim Jong Il, the idea of self-sufficiency, *Juche*, has remained one of the most important cornerstones of the state's ideology. *Juche* is often understood as a philosophical concept describing a state of self-reliance. However, in the North Korean context *Juche* is more accurately understood as political/ideological, economic and military independence.

There have been no major ideological developments since Kim Jong Il came to power in 1997, but his slightly more pragmatic policies have led to the establishment of full diplomatic ties with a large number of European countries as well as Canada, Australia and several others. The North has also increased its efforts to seek foreign investment and has developed a host of new laws facilitating Capitalist practices. It seems

as if China has taught North Korea that rapid Capitalist growth is no longer incompatible with a powerful central state. Great headway was made in 2002 when Japan and North Korea established full diplomatic ties. Relations with the USA under former President Bill Clinton also improved considerably, but hit rock bottom after the more confrontational George W. Bush came to power and placed North Korea on his infamous 'Axis of Evil' list⁴. Most importantly, however, the greatest diplomatic advances were with South Korea as Kim Dae Jung's innovative and pragmatic 'Sunshine Policy' favoured change through dialogue, encouraged economic assistance, cultural exchanges and political cooperation in order to normalise relations and ultimately to achieve reunification⁵. North Korea's overarching *Juche* policies of self-reliance appear, in the new millenium, to be coming to an end. "Put in place to insulate the nation against the disasters of colonialization, depression, and war, they seem irrelevant now" (Cumings, 2005: p. 437). Having kept a secure ideological distance from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies, the country survived the collapse of the Soviet bloc politically without any damage.

After the first ever inter-Korean summit between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il in June 2000, debates about the reunification of the divided Korean peninsula were reignited. Both Korean states proclaim



Illustration 3 Street propaganda

eventual unification as a high priority political goal, and a united Korea is an essential element of both Koreas' political discourses. However, there is widespread scepticism that this is going to happen in the foreseeable future. First, the North's and the South's ideas about how to achieve reunification and what the outcome would be are miles apart. Second, the status quo of two co-existing Korean states is beneficial to all parties concerned, not only to the two superpowers (China and the USA) but most of all to the two Koreas⁶:

One remarkable feature of North Korea's external environment after the collapse of the socialist states in many parts of the world is that all of the four surrounding powers — China, the U.S., Russia and Japan — are against the collapse of the North. Preoccupied with its domestic affairs and afraid of the negative impact of North Korea's sudden collapse on itself, each of them is trying to help stabilize North Korea in one way or another. (Hak, 1996: p. 27)

Considering that the two Koreas technically remain in a state of war because their three-year conflict in the early 1950s ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty, there has been some major progress over the last decade which is partly driven by — and partly reflected in — the world



Illustration 4 A “high-tech” amusement park



Illustration 5 *The reunification monument in the North Korean capital Pyongyang*

of sport. Prior to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics the two Koreas marched together at various opening ceremonies of high-profile international events, repeatedly held ‘unification matches’ involving representatives from both countries and organised several inter-Korean sport exchanges (Merkel, 2008). These activities did not only “promote détente between the two Koreas” (Levermore and Budd, 2004: p. 3) but also kept the highly emotional reunification issue in the public discourse without the need to engage in complex and difficult political negotiations.

In November 2005, sport administrators from North and South Korea agreed in principle to form a unified team for the Beijing Olympics in order to take the symbolic reconciliation of the divided Korean people one step further. After lengthy negotiations this did not happen due to a fundamental disagreement on the selection of athletes (Cha, 2009: pp. 42–43). Nevertheless, for many political commentators, the declaration of intention itself represented a major breakthrough, another sign that North Korea was edging out of its isolation, and a new milestone for inter-Korean efforts to go one step further in their cooperation. North Korea’s willingness to engage constructively with the South in discussing sport matters (and gradually to abandon its isolationist politics) was, however, undermined by two unfortunate events that caused a severe

deterioration of their political relationship. First, South Korea's new president, Lee Myung Bak, has taken a much tougher line than his liberal predecessors Roh Moo Hyun and Kim Dae Jung. In fact, he has abandoned their successful 'Sunshine Policy', which favoured rapprochement and engagement, and replaced it with his 'Vision 3000', which ties economic aid and political cooperation to the denuclearisation of the North. Second, the killing of a South Korean tourist by a North Korean soldier on 11 July 2008 in the South-East of North Korea was significant. The 53-year-old woman was shot after wandering into a fenced-off military area near the Mount Geumgang resort, a popular tourist destination and symbol of cross-border reconciliation opened to South Koreans in 1998. Subsequently the two countries did not even march together at the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Tensions between North Korea and the rest of the world increased again from the late 2008 onwards, and in April 2009 the country abandoned international talks aimed at ending its nuclear activities. Subsequently North Korea conducted a small number of nuclear tests which the global community repeatedly condemned.

However, this is the conventional view of North Korea. Bruce Cumings has suggested that there is an alternative way of thinking about North Korea:

... as a small, Third World, postcolonial nation that has been gravely wounded, first by forty years of Japanese colonialism and then by another sixty years of national division and war, and that is deeply insecure, threatened by the world around it. And so it projects a fearsome image. This is the only post-war communist state to have had its territory occupied by a foreign army, in the fall and winter of 1950; the unrestrained bombing campaign remains a heavy memory, and its weight can still be felt in present-day North Korea. From time to time one still senses the smell of death and nearness of evil. This feeling also issues forth merely from looking at the careworn, desolate faces of the older generation. ... they suffered one of the most appalling wars in an appallingly violent twentieth century. (2004: pp. 151–152)

This paper will keep Cumings' sensitive and sensible suggestion in mind in order to develop an empathetic understanding (Max Weber) and to see the world through the eyes of the North Korean state without abandoning a critical acuity. The research employed several primary research methods (e.g. documentary analysis, interviews, participant observation) which involved travelling to both South and North Korea. The latter happened in September 2008 during the official celebrations of the 60th

anniversary of the North Korean state. The focus was on policy issues as well as the political contents and messages of two mass spectacles, i.e. the Arirang Festival and a new show entitled 'Prosper our Motherland'. Both spectacles are part of a major propaganda offensive on a scale that would make even big-spending Hollywood directors envious.

North Korean-style mass spectacles and mega events

North Korea's outdoor mass gymnastic games are usually staged in the capital's (Pyongyang) May Day stadium that can host up to 150,000 spectators. They consist of three distinctive components. First, a floor-show of complex and highly choreographed group routines performed by tens of thousands of gymnasts (with large artificial flowers, flags, hoops, balls, ropes and clubs), acrobats (with poles, ladders, springboards, trampolines and huge metal-framed wheels) and dancers. Furthermore, the cast includes a military tattoo, hordes of waving, smiling children, an aerial ballet by dancers on bungee ropes, thousands of gymnasts, flying acrobats, and military personnel performing taekwondo routines. Second, the backdrop, a giant human mosaic forming colourful, elaborate and detailed panoramas of historical and contemporary scenes, landscapes, architecture, portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, objects, slogans and cartoons. More than 20,000 school children (aged between 13 and 15) hold up coloured cards that are part of a book with a total of almost 200 pages. The children change them so quickly and in complete unison that these images appear to be animated — all synchronised to a humble video and laser light show. Third, the music that provides the acoustic link between the backdrop and the performers in the centre of the May Day stadium, ensuring a dynamic flow and coherence of the performance.

As with all achievements in North Korea, ultimately responsible for this exuberant artistic arrangement are the two Kims.

The Juche-oriented mass gymnastics of Korea originated from *Flower Gymnastics*, a work President Kim Il Sung created in 1930, the early days of his anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle. Today it represents the ideological theme of the history of the country and nation... As Kim Jong Il pointed out in a meeting with the mass gymnastics producers on April 11, 1987, the Korean style of mass gymnastics is a mixed form of comprehensive physical exercises with a combination of high ideological content, artistic quality and gymnastic skills. (Kim Song Mo, 2002: pp. 6–7)

The result, organised in a set of distinct but coherent acts, combines elements from physical theatre, rhythmic gymnastics, Cirque du Soleil and Broadway musicals. The one-and-a-half hour shows are impressive, energetic performances with no intermission. One cast of several hundred performers flows off the field while the next flows onto it. The colourful and imaginative costumes, a booming soundtrack and a modest fireworks display improve the spectacle even further⁷. These mass gymnastic games easily outclass the most incredible Olympic opening ceremonies and the often glamorous half-time entertainment of the American Superbowl. Although outside North Korea they are often criticised as being nothing more than a blunt propaganda tool praising the Communist state and its leaders, their meaning and significance is much more complex and multi-layered.

These mass gymnastic games make full use of the impoverished state's last natural resource: the inexpensive labour of highly educated and utterly obedient young people. Participation is not voluntary but mandatory. All educational institutions in Pyongyang compete for a place in the performances and go through an extended training and selection programme⁸ which commences at least nine months before the actual performances take place. Those young people participating in the intensive daily training routines are excused from their classes. Since many of the older students subsequently struggle to meet university entry requirements, the North Korean education authorities have introduced a system whereby these students receive additional points to compensate for their participation in the performances. However, while these students might struggle academically, there is little doubt that they have learned something ideologically extremely important: to value the power of collective efforts, ranking it higher than selfishness and individual achievement.

The underlying rationale of these mass gymnastic games is to produce committed young Communists through a combination of physiological and psychological indoctrination. Long hours and months of rigorous, often exhausting training help to instill and continually reinforce an ideology that does not tolerate deviation: subordination of the individual to the group, and the promotion of a single, unified collective will and effort that is above any individual desires or self-interest. This may seem oppressive and morally objectionable but, in fact, it is generally considered an honour to be part of the mass games and only the most talented are chosen to join. A South Korean journalist and North Korea expert with whom I discussed the Arirang festival argued that "what appears to be a kind of systematic indoctrination and exploitation, inhuman and repugnant [but] for the thousands of performers it is an honour to be chosen".



Illustration 6 *North Korean state symbols*

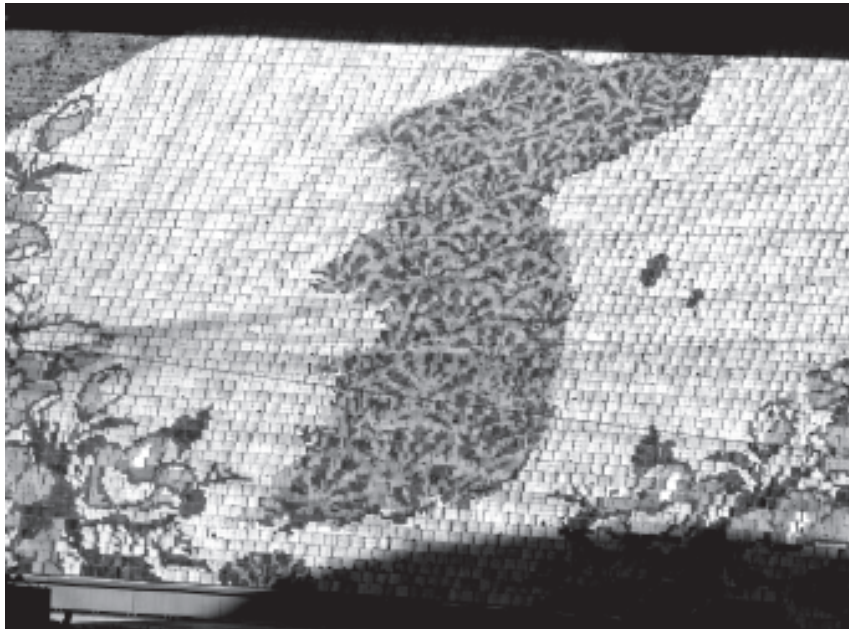


Illustration 7 *The united Korea*



Illustration 8 The armed forces



Illustration 9 Takwoendo displays

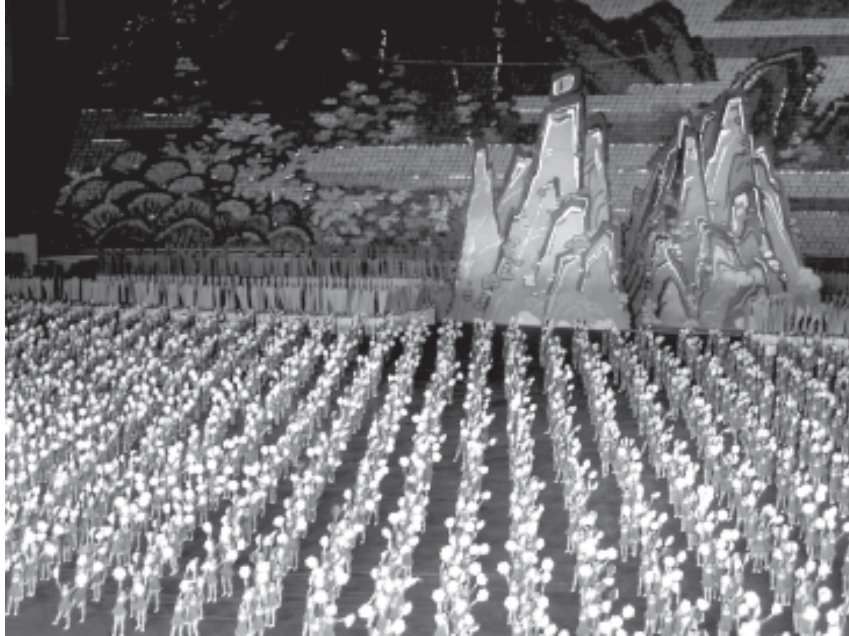


Illustration 11 *Gymnasts*

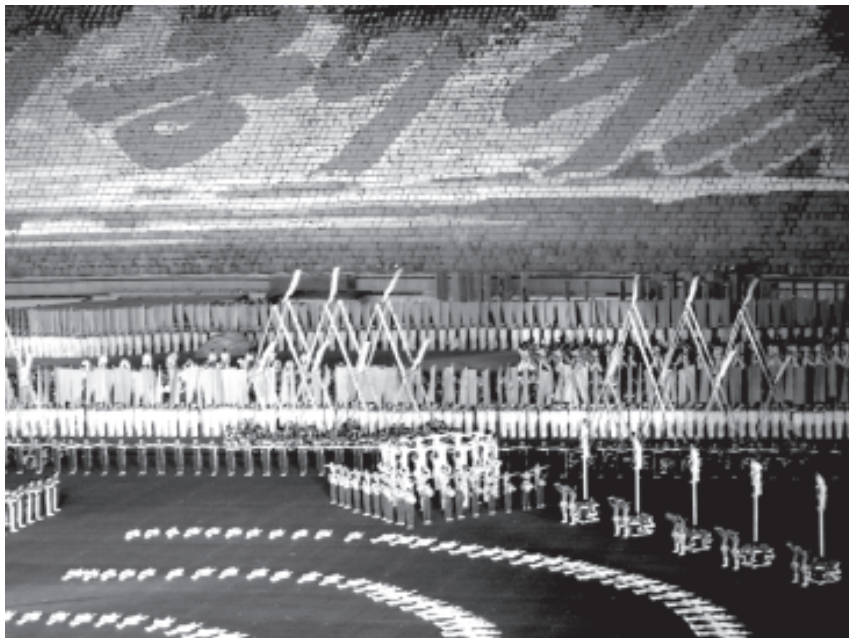


Illustration 12 *Acrobatics*

The expected multiple benefits of active participation in mass gymnastic performances are clearly outlined North Korea's official sports policy⁹:

Pupils should be encouraged to participate in mass gymnastic performances. These are a form of comprehensive mass sport and combine athletic techniques and ideological and artistic content. They are very effective both in educating pupils in the collectivist spirit and in building up their strength and improving their artistic skills. By giving frequent gymnastic performances of this type, pupils will contribute greatly to educating the working people and enhancing the prestige of the country abroad. (Kim Jong Il, 1997: p. 5)

The grand scale of thousands of young people working with such militaristic precision and in complete unison, as though they were a single body, reflects the ideological underpinning of North Korean society. It emphasises the superiority of the group over the individual and demonstrates to both participants and spectators how working together for the common good can create such works of beauty and perfection.

There is little doubt about the popularity of these mass games among the North Korean population. Cautious estimates suggest that at least 8 million North Koreans attended the 200 or so performances of the first three runs of the Arirang Festival (in 2002, 2005 and 2007): that is approximately 40,000 spectators per show. On each of these occasions the popular demand was so overwhelming that the shows had to be extended for several weeks.

The artistic arrangements, colourful displays and political messages of the 2002 and 2005 editions of the Arirang Festival were very much the same with a few minor modifications reflecting new political realities. In 2005, one brief sequence of the Arirang festival disappeared after South Korean media complained about the divisive content. In the show, three martial arts specialists from North Korea kicked, punched and finally defeated 30 unnamed opponents. But there was a clue: the uniforms of the 'enemies' were identical to those that had been used by the South Korean armed forces before 1990. "Unification Ministry and intelligence sources said the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il watched the show Sunday and that his 'on-the-scene inspection' may have triggered the cut" (Jong Ang Ilbo, 2005). This last-minute alteration was widely regarded as another small gesture among many of the new openness and confidence in evidence in North Korea.

Both festivals, in 2002 and 2005, attempted to prove North Korea was not the evil place depicted by former US President George W. Bush. However, there were also a few differences and changes. Firstly, a prime motive for hosting the Arirang festival in 2002 was rivalry with the South



Illustration 10 *Dancers*



— which, with Japan, at the same time co-hosted the FIFA World Cup. Secondly, whilst the 2002 event was an almost exclusively North Korean affair with only a handful of selected foreigners attending, in 2005 more foreigners than ever before were allowed to witness this spectacle. Consequently, “the festival brought official delegations from China, Russia and Cuba as well as high ranking visitors from Mexico and a host of other nations” (Cho and Faiol, 2005). Even Americans, in the public and political discourse of North Korea still the arch enemies, were issued with visas to enter North Korea. Along with a growing number of curious Western spectators, in 2005 ordinary South Korean citizens were for the first time allowed to fly directly from Seoul (Incheon) to Pyongyang and attend the Arirang spectacle. Approximately 1,000 South Koreans made the Arirang pilgrimage on overnight package tours. Kim Jong Il’s reinvigorated ‘invitation diplomacy’, a political tool his father used to exploit to great effect, was clearly intended to show how strong and stable North Korea is, how firmly he is in control and how popular he remains with the people. This message would not get out loud and clear unless there were select groups of foreigners there to witness it.

So far, the most prominent spectators were the US Secretary of State and the South Korean President. Bill Clinton’s foreign minister Madeleine Albright visited North Korea in October 2000. The North Korean authorities changed her itinerary at the last minute to include a mass gymnastics show. The show Albright was treated to was entitled ‘The Invincible Worker’s Party’, a kind of predecessor of the Arirang Festival. In 2007, following high-profile talks with Kim Jong Il, Roh Moo Hyun, the South Korean president, enjoyed the Arirang performance. “North Korea considerably modified its mass gymnastics and artistic show by taking out parts that stress ideological loyalty and adding content to honor visiting South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, who watched it Wednesday night” (*The Korea Times*, 4 October 2007).

There were no high-profile visitors attending the 2008 events that celebrated the 60th anniversary of the North Korean state. Return visitors to North Korea to whom I spoke noted that anti-American propaganda and slogans had been taken down in the capital. According to one official from the North Korean Tourist Board, the country was expecting about 8,000 Chinese visitors and several hundred Western tourists, mostly from European countries. All of them obviously provide some hard currency for the impoverished state. Ticket prices for the two shows ranged from 50 to 100 Euros per performance. Only foreign currencies were accepted, with Euros the preferred option. There were some improvised souvenir stalls in the May Day stadium, where women in traditional dress sold glossy programmes, posters, handmade dolls and home-made DVDs with price tags in Euros and US dollars.

Foreigners were encouraged to attend the mass gymnastic games but not allowed to watch the military and people's parade on the 9th September¹⁰.

Around one million people are thought to have paraded through Pyongyang. A state television broadcast monitored in Seoul showed displays of armaments, legions of goose-stepping soldiers and tens of thousands of North Koreans shouting praises to him [Kim Il Sung] in unison, though some analysts thought it lower-key than previous parades. (Branigan, 2008)

The 2008 edition of the Arirang Festival continued the tradition of previous performances and followed their established pattern. The show comprised six distinctive sections. It started with a 'Grand Prelude', followed by four acts each with several scenes, and ended with a 'Grand Finale'. After the prelude, the first act was devoted to the 'Arirang Nation' comprising images of 'crossing the river Tuman', 'the star of Korea', 'my homeland' and 'our arms'. In the second act, entitled 'Songun Arirang', the main theme continued to be Korean nationalism and the exalted position of the North Korean army. Soldiers entered and dominated the stadium floor while the backdrop featured a number of martial arts images. North Korea's Songun policy prioritizes the armed forces in state and society and justifies the allocation of enormous national resources to the military apparatus. North Korea has one of the world's largest standing armies with approximately one million soldiers. The third act ('Arirang of Happiness') conveyed a number of political and economic messages (e.g. 'Modernisation and Information of the People's Economy' or 'Science and Technology to the Highest Level!') stressing the current and future development of North Korean society. Finally, the issue of Korean reunification was addressed in the fourth act ('Arirang Reunification') whilst the 'Grande Finale' ('Arirang of a Thriving Nation') predicted peace and prosperity for the whole peninsula should such an event ever occur.

The 'Prosper our Motherland' show, which premiered in 2008, was smaller ('only' an estimated 50,000 performers participated), staged in the afternoon and celebrated 60 years of North Korean history. It comprised five distinctive sections: a prelude, three acts and a finale repeating some of the themes of the Arirang Festival — e.g. the second act also focused on the hegemonic position (Songun) of the armed forces in North Korean society. The first act was entitled 'In the bosom of the Great Leader' and almost entirely devoted to the life of Kim Il Sung, "the centre of humankind", and his achievements, for example steering the process of rapid social change, the industrialization of the country, the country's surprising success at the 1966 Soccer World Cup



Illustration 13 The 'reunification train'



Illustration 14 An invitation to return in 2012

in England as well as the establishment of the North Korean film industry. The act finished with a backdrop reading “We are missing Kim Il Sung”. The following section continued to praise North Korea as a ‘revolutionary motherland’, the ‘spirit of the brave soldiers’, ‘Taekwondo as the spirit of a nation’ and the country’s Songun policy. The final element of the second act was particularly popular with the local spectators as it featured five-year old children on unicycles with large balloons, which was accompanied by the audience’s loud chanting of “man se, man se” (Korean for “hooray”).

The third act of the ‘Prosper our Motherland’ show and the fourth act of the Arirang Festival were of particular significance for political observers since they celebrated the recent improvements in inter-Korean relations and symbolically ‘lived the dream’ of future reunification.

One segment that was used in both shows featured the ‘Reunification Train’ — a reference to a railway link across the DMZ that was officially completed in June 2003. The line is only 27.5 kilometres long but of great symbolic importance. Trains run daily to the Kaesong Industrial Park north of the border where South Korean companies use the North’s workforce to build their goods. The freight service eventually began in December 2007. “But in the first ten months, it carried only 340 tons of goods, the operators said in a report to the Seoul parliament. On 150 out of 163 return trips so far, it was a ghost train, carrying nothing at all” (Spencer, 2008). This discrepancy between reality and wishful thinking can also be found in several other images that created colourful illusions, e.g. one of the Kims walking through a fertile and healthy barley field, a panorama of a modern, high-tech industrial complex, children working on modern computers, and a shopping basket with fresh eggs, corn cobs, tinned pork and tuna. Most of these everyday products were not available in shops in September 2008 when I visited the country.

Less surreal but rather a direct political reminder for the South were those backdrops that referred to two very significant dates in recent Korean history that have become synonyms for inter-Korean progress: 15th June and 4th October. Whilst the latter makes reference to the 2007 treaty, the former refers to the joint declaration of 2000. Both are political milestones in the Korean reunification process but have not yet been fully implemented. In popular discourses, these dates have been elevated to a mythical status. All North Koreans I spoke to appeared to have a detailed understanding of the two treaties and use these dates as abbreviations for complex political issues.

However, it is not only the impressive backdrop that communicates political promises, messages and futures. It is also the performers in the centre of the May Day stadium. They not only create aesthetically

pleasing formations, such as blossoming flowers or intersecting geometric shapes that expand, collapse and flow into each other, but they also contribute significantly to the political character of these shows and thus create a symbiosis of art, physical culture and ideology. The themes of Korean division and unity also repeatedly occur as part of the gymnastics display. One of the sets used in both shows depicted a dramatic physical representation of the separation of the nation. A mass of young people magically assemble into the perfect shape of the whole Korean peninsula. Against the backdrop of some dramatic music, the southern and northern halves of the peninsula inexorably drift asunder; aching arms are outstretched in futility as unseen forces pull the two halves apart. Subsequently, the backdrop created a montage of South and North Korean children, while uttering the chant: "How much longer do we have to be divided due to foreign forces?"

The finales of both shows were forward looking. The last act of the Arirang Festival was entitled 'Arirang of a thriving nation' and celebrated peace and prosperity as the outcome of reunification of the Korean people. Both the backdrop as well as performers in the centre of the May Day stadium formed on various occasions the shape of the whole Korean peninsula without the dividing line along the 38th parallel. The 'Prosper our Motherland' performance, however, avoided the reunification issue and predicted 'prosperity for the Socialist motherland'. Both shows finished with a colourful display of the number 2012 when North Korea intends to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung with another mass gymnastic extravaganza¹¹.

Both the Arirang Festival and the 'Prosper our Motherland' show play an important part in North Korea's domestic and foreign policy agenda. They reinforce the religious cult of its rulers and are meant to demonstrate the uniqueness and success of the country's political system, and to demonstrate the North's commitment to reunification. Recent economic and political developments have made it increasingly difficult for North Korea to continue adhering to its *Juche* philosophy of self-reliance. The desperate need for foreign currencies and a continuation of humanitarian aid to deal with the disastrous consequences of years of inefficient agricultural production and extreme weather conditions have opened up the country to foreigners, especially members of international non-governmental organisations and, more recently, to an increasing number of tourists. Although these events are a public demonstration of North Korea's pride and self-confidence, they also celebrate Korean unity and keep the reunification issue in the public discourse without the need to engage in difficult political negotiations.

Conclusion

North Korea's contemporary mass gymnastic games, the Arirang Festival and the 'Prosper our Motherland' show, are unique and grandiose, ideological spectacles and contemporary reminders of the powerful and lasting Soviet influences on the development of sport and physical culture in various parts of the world. These Soviet-style displays of physical culture involve the masses and fall outside the dominant 'higher, stronger, faster' philosophy.

Due to the questionable reputation of North Korea's ruling regime, it has increasingly become important to initiate an alternative discourse that would help generate international recognition in general and a positive reputation in particular. Usually, the political benefits of isolated countries participating in international sport events derive from the association with successful athletes or teams. Possessing only very limited resources and expertise, it is very unlikely that North Korea will be able to produce an Asian 'sports miracle' and impress the rest of the world with outstanding performances, athletes and teams, as for example the former East-Germany did (Merkel 2009). Instead the country's political elite have promoted a remarkably different model for the political exploitation of physical culture — one that is relatively inexpensive and fulfills a number of functions domestically and internationally. The sheer magnitude and exuberance of these mass games is overwhelming, and the design and choreography is an impressive visual feast.

In addition to entertainment and propaganda these mass games provide the North Korean rulers with a rare and unrivalled opportunity to present the usually secluded state to the rest of the world and to showcase the strength and vigour of its Socialist system. For the North Korean government this is an important symbolic gesture demonstrating more openness and transparency. As well as underpinning the religious cult of Kim Jong Il and his father, these two festivals are also part of a wider international charm offensive. Kim Jong Il's 'invitation diplomacy' intends to show how strong, stable and proud North Korea is, and how popular he remains with the people. Furthermore, both shows are an opportunity for Kim Jong Il to showcase his vision of an alternative Socialist North Korea to the world since they place extreme emphasis on group dynamics and collective efforts rather than individual prowess.

The reunification issue has consistently been the most prominent theme in all the Arirang performances over the last decade. The new 'Prosper our Motherland' show went beyond the sentimental and emotional celebration of Korean integrity and unity. The performance not only highlighted a few of the visible achievements but also added some

interesting details through explicit references to specific meetings and treaties that were intended to drive the reunification of the two countries forward but have not yet been fully put into action.

The shows are also a major hard currency earner for North Korea as they attract increasing numbers of Chinese and Western tourists. Visitors left the May Day stadium in Pyongyang with memories of a grand and overwhelming show. In the words of one male Canadian spectator: "It was a fantastic spectacle. I have never seen anything like this before and I would have never expected such a degree of perfection. But it was also scary" (9 September, 2008).

Whether these mass games can put North Korea back into the fold of respectable nations remains an open question. However, there is a strong likelihood that these displays will soon become hallmark events of international status, providing the host community with unrivaled prominence on the global stage of mass spectacle.

Notes

- ¹ A recent *google* search (30 July 2009) for "mass games North Korea" resulted in 805,000 hits; many of these websites containing images. Furthermore, *youtube* hosts a large number of fairly short clips of the mass games.
- ² Whenever the term 'Korea' is used, it refers to the Korean nation and peninsula as a whole, deliberately ignoring the political division.
- ³ The North disagrees with this view of history as they argue that the South, in conjunction with the USA, started the Korean War. In fact, in North Korea this conflict is referred to as the "Victorious Fatherland Liberation War". Most experts, however, agree that the Korean War was a failed attempt by the North to reunite the divided country.
- ⁴ At the end of the same year, the movie *Die Another Day* was released. Pierce Brosnan's last mission as British agent James Bond starts off in North Korea with a high-speed hovercraft chase through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas. Bond is captured and subjected to vicious North Korean torture before being released in exchange for prisoners, amongst these Zao, a North Korean high-calibre villain. Bond's mission to track down Zao and his accomplice, the British billionaire Gustav Graves, takes him to Hong Kong, Cuba, London, Iceland and back to the divided Korean peninsula, leading to a violent and destructive showdown as a laser cannon is fired to slice open a gigantic corridor through the DMZ in order to facilitate a Northern invasion of the South.
- ⁵ In June 2000, the South Korean president Kim Dae Jung participated in the first North-South presidential summit with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il, which later led to his winning the Nobel Peace Prize. The

committee justified the decision in this way: "For his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea and in East Asia in general, and for peace and reconciliation with North Korea in particular".

- 6 Japan does not support Korean reunification either. A unified Korean peninsula would form an influential political force in East Asia and also be a powerful economic competitor in the global market, which Japan in particular would have to fear.
- 7 The Arirang Festival is in fact recognised by the Guinness Book of World Records as the "largest gymnastic and artistic performance".
- 8 Daniel Gordon's fantastic documentary entitled "A State Of Mind" (2003) follows two North Korean schoolgirls, aged 11 and 13, and their families for over eight months as they prepare for the mass games. The film reveals a rare but detailed glimpse into North Korean society and culture as well as the discipline and dedication of the two girls during the vigorous and intense training process. To prepare for the massive event the two girls practice outdoors (even in the coldest winter months) on a daily basis, repeating the same moves hour after hour on concrete lots, until they have achieved perfection. In addition, Daniel Gordon also spends time with the girls' families. This makes for a surprisingly candid view of even the most mundane aspects of North Korean culture.
- 9 North Korea's official sports policy is based on a speech Kim Jong Il gave on 19 May 1996 to officials working in sport and physical education. Three years later, it became the country's official sports policy.
- 10 Kim Jong Il himself did not attend the military parade generating world-wide speculation about his health. He also did not appear in the May Day stadium for the 2008 mass gymnastic games.
- 11 Despite the rising tensions on the Korean peninsula caused by the testing of nuclear missiles by North Korea the official North Korean news agency, KCNA, announced in April 2009 that the next mass games will in fact take place from 10 August to 30 September 2009. Information provided by a few specialist North Korea travel agencies suggests that interest so far is fairly limited.

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