Cultural differences when dealing with North Koreans and the DPRK

Paul Tjia, July 2024

Until the 1990s, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had only limited collaboration and contacts with Western Europe or the United States. This changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which triggered economic disaster and famine: the period of the Arduous March. At the end of the 1990s, many Western humanitarian NGOs entered the country. These organizations quickly faced a series of impediments, including restrictions on the movement of personnel and monitoring activities, intrusive oversight of staff by North Korean guides, the assignment of local staff with English language but no relevant technical skills, the banning of aid staff who spoke Korean and the lack of access to restricted regions of the country.

In addition, with little or no experience operating in North-East Asia, the humanitarian community's understanding of the social, historical and political context in North Korea was limited. Except a little number of training cases in Germany and the UK, experts of NGOs working in North Korea did not undergo any intercultural training in advance. And exacerbated by a chronic lack of local knowledge, the staff experienced many problems when dealing with the Koreans. This also led to a perception that the North Korean authorities were unwilling to assist, when in fact individual North Koreans may have simply lacked the skills or cultural understanding of the humanitarian actors they were working with.[1]

We are now more than twenty-five years later, and numerous Americans and Europeans have been involved in collaboration projects with North Koreans, even though the geopolitical situation and the different political systems still create complications. These projects have been in many areas, such business, education, humanitarian work, sports, culture and tourism. Compared with the past, many books and articles are now available about North Korea, and they cover a wide range of issues. However, one topic is often missing: the cultural differences when dealing with North Koreans. Being able to deal with cultural issues is important, since it can improve the communication in a challenging environment.

Cultural issues are not new to me, as a consultant in the field of international IT outsourcing. At the end of the 1990s, Dutch clients began outsourcing their IT projects to companies based in India. Despite working with large and professional Indian IT firms, and employing highly educated English-speaking software engineers, communication was often problematic. The cultural differences between Indians and the Dutch negatively affected the quality of the projects, and for some, 'India' even became an abbreviation for 'I Never Do It Again'. Requested by clients, I started offering the training: 'How to deal with the Indian business culture'. Also my book 'Outsourcing Information Technology', which I co-authored with Professor Erran Carmel, contains a chapter about cultural differences.[2]

The cultural divide with North Korea is vast. It is my experience that typically foreigners who find success in the DPRK are those who have worked in other Asian countries and have learned to adapt to local cultures. Many professionals dealing with North Korea are relatively new to the

[1] Emma Campbell, Famine in North Korea: humanitarian policy in the late 1990s

[2] Paul Tjia, Erran Carmel. Offshoring Information Technology (some parts of this article are taken from Chapter 9)

topic of culture or lack situational awareness. Since the start of the Covid pandemic in 2020, the borders of the DPRK have been closed. As soon as the country re-opens, foreign students will again enrol courses in Pyongyang, European academics will collaborate with Korean universities, business people will conduct trade with Korean companies and diplomats will engage in negotiations. They will all have intensive personal communication with North Koreans. This article is meant as a general introduction to the topic of cultural differences, and I hope it can contribute to creating a common ground between the different cultures and ideologies.

What is culture?

Culture is a dynamic mix of shared values, beliefs, and practices that shape group identities and evolve with historical and current influences. It is the habits and thought processes that we have learned from growing up in a particular environment - this could be a family, a school and a country. According to Dutch professor Geert Hofstede, culture is the "collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group… from another."[3]

Culture affects:

- the way we see ourselves and go about relationships
- the way we respect people and grant them status
- the way we dress, eat, work, raise our children
- the way we do business
- the way we negotiate
- the way we deal with deadlines
- the way we solve problems
- the way we write emails.

Every adult is a member of many cultures. He is a member of a national culture; she is a member of a professional culture (such as a musician or doctor); she is a member of an organizational culture (such as a ministry or a political party); and he is a member of one or more work teams, each with its own culture. Many of these cultural types, such as organizational culture and team culture, can be re-programmed in our brains fairly quickly (especially for those under 30 years old). However, *national culture* cannot. This is because people who are raised in the same culture are taught similar values and societal norms from a young age, and these values become ingrained like a cultural foot-print on one's psyche.

Our national cultures are very deeply embedded in each of us, passed from generation to generation, and are largely programmed into us by age ten. Values and beliefs include: good versus bad, ugly versus nice, dirty versus clean, and rational versus irrational. In every culture, these dichotomies are interpreted differently. Our cultural orientations manifest themselves in some behaviours and in phenomena that can be seen with our eyes. We may be able, with training and experience, to see some of these behaviours, such as body language, different decision-making norms, gestures and business etiquette. Outsiders may learn some of the rituals, such as handshakes, or the correct protocol for handing out a business card or answering a telephone call.

However, much of what is programmed into our individual culture is invisible, driven by deep values and beliefs which are very difficult to change or observe. A large geographical distance is

[3] Geert Hofstede, Culture's consequences

not required to experience cultural differences. These can also be found between neighboring countries: it is for example difficult for Belgians and Dutch to collaborate successfully - even while the language is the same.

The focus of this article is on the cultural differences when dealing and communicating with North Koreans, especially during long-term collaboration projects. We will also address aspects of the political and ideological system of the DPRK, when this has an impact on the collaboration.

Cultural Orientations – and why they can be useful

There are many theories about cultural differences. Geert Hofstede can be considered the pioneer in cross-cultural research. The purpose of his research was to identify cultural differences from one country to another. As a psychologist, between 1967 and 1973, he gathered and analysed over 116.000 survey questionnaires. The questionnaires were collected from IBM employees working in 72 countries, and involved 183 questions about their work environment.

Back in those days, there were no spreadsheets or statistical software packages. Instead, Hofstede had to use punch cards, IBM-mainframes and matrix-printers. Hence, it was an astonishing effort to analyse the data to find certain patterns – something to keep in mind when critics would later question the 'simplicity' of his method. Hofstede analysed data of the 40 countries for which the number of employees was judged sufficiently large to allow reliable comparison.

His data were derived from a huge sample of IBM employees in offices around the world. Thus, despite all of them being both members of a specific computer culture and members of the (strong) IBM organizational culture, the individuals could be grouped across six major national cultural orientations. Each country has its own rankings for these dimensions. Geert Hofstede's first book on culture, 'Culture's consequences', appeared in 1980. His model consists of the following six cultural dimensions:

- Power Distance (high versus low)
- Uncertainty Avoidance (high versus low)
- Individualism versus Collectivism
- Masculinity versus Femininity
- Long versus Short-Term Orientation
- Indulgence versus Restraint.

Another Dutch researcher is Fons Trompenaars, who a few decades later, in the early 1990s, looked at the influence of national culture on organizational culture at 10 refineries of Royal Dutch Shell. Together with British Charles Hampden-Turner, they studied the preferences and values of 46.000 managers across 40 countries and found that people across cultures differ in specific, often predictable ways. To compare countries, they compiled a database with specific rankings for each country. Their study 'Riding the Waves of Culture' was published in 1993. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner found seven main cultural dimensions:

- Universalism versus Particularism (rules versus relationships)
- Individualism versus Communitarianism
- Specific versus Diffuse (public space versus private space)

- Neutral versus Emotional (expression of emotions)
- Achievement versus Ascription (how status is based)
- Sequential time versus Synchronous time
- Internal direction versus Outer direction (related to control).

In the United States, the focus of anthropologist Edward Hall in the 1950s was on how people communicate. Based on his experience in the Foreign Service, he wrote in 1959 'The Silent Language', where he first coined the terms high-context and low-context to describe different ways how information is transmitted or communicated.

More recent cross-cultural research is being done by American professor Erin Meyer. In 2014, she described in her book 'The Culture Map' 8 key scales across which cultures operate. These scales are related to:

- Communicating (Low-context versus High-context)
- Evaluating (Direct negative feedback versus Indirect negative feedback)
- Persuading (Principles-first versus Application-first)
- Leading (Egalitarian versus Hierarchical)
- Deciding (Consensual versus Top-down)
- Trusting (Task-based versus Relationship-based)
- Disagreeing (Confrontational versus Avoids confrontation)
- Scheduling (Linear-time versus Flexible-time).

Some academics now tend to scorn researchers like Geert Hofstede, since his research took place a long time ago, and according to critics: "are just snapshots of a group of people taken at a particular time." Initially, Eastern Europe and China were not even included, because of the lack of an IBM presence. Hofstede also generalizes and does not deal with regional differences. In addition, cultures are not static and can change, because of factors involving the economy, marriage trends, birthrates, immigration or religion (e.g. a collectivistic country can become more individualistic over time). Nevertheless, Hofstede's work has been essential to a generation of academics, business people and expats. Understanding where our own culture lies on each scale relative to other cultures helps us contextualize and work better with people from different cultural contexts. It is useful in understanding the challenges when we communicate.

When discussing cultural differences, there is no 'good' or 'bad' in culture; it is about preferences on how people navigate work and life. The values relative to each other show how we communicate, plan, interact and complete tasks. We can use it trying to prevent misunderstandings in communication with people from different cultures and to reduce conflicts and inefficiencies. Working with North Koreans can be complicated, but being able to deal with the cultural differences will make collaboration somewhat less challenging.

Misunderstandings and problems when dealing with North Koreans can also be the result of the specific context (e.g. the business situation) or the ideological differences, which creates distrust on both sides. In addition, cultural tendencies do not predict individual behavior, and other factors, like gender, personality, age and life experience are also relevant. North Koreans are individuals with different personalities (e.g. introvert or extravert) and some have been living abroad for a long time, while for others, you might be the first foreigner they will meet. Some will speak good English (and have even studied in a foreign country), while others are struggling with the language.

We communicate with people, not with cultures or countries: “Cultures don’t meet, people do”. Nevertheless, culture matters, and we have to accept, respect and adapt to cultural differences. Investing in your ‘Cultural Intelligence’ will yield a very tangible return on investment.

Selected relevant cultural orientations

Various researchers have found a range of cultural dimensions, but these are not equally important for a general introduction. For this article, a few orientations have been selected as having the most relevance when dealing with North Koreans.

1. Power Orientation: Egalitarian versus Hierarchical

North Korea is a top-down system that needs to be dealt with as such. In the DPRK - and on the Korean Peninsula as a whole - people show a respect for hierarchies, including the use of a communication style that reflects these hierarchies. The Korean language itself uses different verbs and forms of verbs, depending on the ranking of people who speak to each other.

Hierarchy is immediately visible by the specific position of the former and current leaders in North Korea. The ideology of the state is Juche, of which the core is the idea that the whole of society should follow the will of the leader in order to be independent together. It is also known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, where the late Great Leader or the Eternal President Kim Il Sung can be considered as Father and the Korean Worker's Party as Mother of the Korean people. North Koreans will often describe their country to foreigners as a family, with their leader as the father figure, and everyone else with a role to play. Kim Il-sung instructed North Koreans that their power as human beings came from subsuming their individual will to that of the collective.

The family unit is important in Korean culture. The emphasis on collectivity includes an obligation to provide for the welfare of family members. North Korean men had been the breadwinners until the nineties and have dominated the family, deciding how money was spent, on the size of their family, the way children were raised and educated, all within the limits set by the political system. As more women become breadwinners with money and power concentrated in their hands, these traditional Confucian roles are not as pervasive as before.

This strict hierarchy is also visible with companies. Bosses in North Korea were expected to behave like good ‘fathers’ with the staff. Subordinates will stay in the office until the boss has left. John Everard, who served as British ambassador to North Korea from 2006 to 2008, observed: ‘North Korean workplaces are very hierarchical. Senior cadres are treated with great deference. At meetings, only the senior man would speak, while his subordinates would sit around him (it was always a man), sometimes carefully scribbling down every word that passed. But in most places I did not sense great tension between seniors and subordinates – I witnessed respect rather than fear’.[4]

Status is also visible, when the boss has a nicer office and access to a car and driver. For Koreans, it will be confusing when misunderstandings about status occur. In 2012, the North Korean restaurant ‘Pyongyang’ opened in Amsterdam. The staff was brought in from North Korea, but the project was founded by two adventurous young Dutchmen. Their investment available was limited, so the building they hired was an old school, which had to be renovated. Most of this

[4] John Everard, Only Beautiful Please. A British Diplomat in North Korea

work was done by themselves, and when the Korean staff arrived in Amsterdam from the airport, they were greeted by one of their new Dutch bosses, who was wearing old clothes and busy painting a wall. This did not make a good first impression, and the Dutch boss 'lost face' immediately. Seven months later, the restaurant closed due to a disagreement between its Dutch owners and North Korean staff (in 2013, it re-opened with an ethnic Korean manager who lived in the Netherlands).

Compared with Western European countries, most cultures in Asia (including North Korea) have a high power distance and are more hierarchical. Hofstede defined power distance as 'the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally'. It expresses one's emotional distance from subordinates and superiors and is one of the most important orientations in a business context. It is useful to have a look at Hofstede's Power Distance Index (high versus low), which shows the degree of inequality between people with and without power in an organization.

A subset of Hofstede's rankings for this orientation appears in Table 1 (specific rankings for North Korea are not available). Note: since culture is a group phenomenon, these indicators were developed for comparing countries, and not individuals, so they do not apply to all people living within that country.

Israel	13	Hierarchy is less important
Germany	35	
Netherlands	38	
USA	40	
Japan	54	
Belgium	56	
South Korea	60	
Singapore	74	
India	77	
China	80	Hierarchy is very important
Russia	95	

Table 1: Power Distance Index.

High power orientation cultures tend to have more autocratic managers. Employees with high power distance respect authority, expect clear instructions, are sensitive to power dynamics, don't 'trouble' the boss when they have problems and do not question or challenge decisions directly.

There is nothing wrong with that, except when a foreign manager comes from a culture with low power distance or more egalitarian. These cultures use participatory and consultative management styles. The boss expects employees to speak up with ideas, seek help when needed, and figure out what to do with minimal guidance. Since individuals from high power orientation cultures are less likely to express disagreement with their managers and are less likely to be forthcoming, managing in these cultures requires more authoritative communication. A hands-off management style, so common in Western Europe, will create a vacuum of direction and leadership. Instead of enabling a team, minimal involvement and guidance will confuse them.

If a business culture involves strong hierarchies, it can cause a certain bureaucracy to occur. Senior management always takes the final decision and staff is not used to taking initiatives as they risk making mistakes. This culture will cause delays, and patience is necessary in some situations. In this framework, a strong social network is very important. Knowing the right people in the right place helps to avoid the bureaucratic obstacles. And since feedback in high power orientation cultures is not forthcoming, one has to develop informal relationships to learn the

view of the Korean employees. Relations and networks are the keywords, so be ready to spend more time on relationship building. Who you know matters, and especially so if you are a foreigner who can get access to these networks.

When dealing with a North Korean organization, especially if you are a manager or boss, capacity building (training and exposure to international business practices) will be required. The attitude towards brainstorming will be different. Individuals from highly individualistic cultures might jump in with new ideas, excited about exploring possibilities. Meanwhile, colleagues from hierarchical cultures might approach the same situation with caution, carefully analysing each option before proposing anything. This difference in comfort with risk can lead to misunderstandings. What one person sees as proactive engagement ("See, I have 4 potential solutions!") might be perceived by another as overwhelming scepticism ("Are all these options really necessary?").

For this reason, the Swiss Felix Abt, who ran a pharmaceutical company in Pyongyang, co-founded the Pyongyang Business School (PBS). “At PBS, we tried to tackle one major problem: training North Korean executives who were familiar with receiving and executing orders in a centrally planned economy to take their own market initiative. To get their operations up to speed, they’d have to abandon much of the older draconian model, and become familiar with basic skills like accounting and controlling, marketing, supply chain management, and strategy.”[5]

Another initiative is Singapore-based Choson Exchange, which has been conducting workshops in the DPRK for more than 10 years. Their trainers discuss the need to flatten the organizational structure and avoid groupthink in order to make the best decisions. This requires creativity, since in the North Korean political culture, everything flows down from a leader and one *must* engage in groupthink as prescribed by the Korean Worker’s Party. But by continually using the word ‘company’ or ‘corporate’, the trainers could keep these risky ideas in a safe space.[6]

During trainings, the North Koreans are hesitant to ask questions. It is also difficult to know what the group thinks, since they respect your authority. A solution is to let them brainstorm without you. Clear instructions must be given days earlier for proper preparation. People can be invited to speak up, since they will not volunteer. In addition, the permanent control situation makes open question sessions, which are an important tool for the success of capacity building, not easily possible. There is always the danger of censoring in the mind of the participants.

2. Relationship Orientation: Individualism versus Collectivism

North Korea, as several other cultures in East Asia, is collectivist – and probably one of the most collectivist cultures on earth. This is demonstrated in their slogans: ‘One for All and All for One’, ‘One United Heart’, ‘Unity is the Core of our Society’ and ‘If the Party Decides, We Do It’. The country puts the whole before the single person. Everyone in North Korea must be part of a group, and must tailor themselves to fit in harmoniously. Individual taste and interest are less relevant, and a main object of criticism in the DPRK’s ideological struggle is individualism.

It is not uncommon, when asked a North Korean: “as a child, you knew exactly what it was you wanted to do with your life?” to hear the answer: “Yes - to serve the motherland”. One can get the impression that to a North Korean, the main purpose for living is to fight for, preserve and protect the Korean nation and its leaders. Each citizen participates in community service on a regular basis by working on state-owned farms, servicing rural communities or cleaning the local

[5] Felix Abt. A capitalist in North Korea. My seven years in the Hermit Kingdom
[6] Andray Abrahamian. Being in North Korea

neighbourhood streets. This community services is above and beyond their jobs and family responsibilities: the group can take precedent.

Synchronized performances such as that of the well-known Arirang Mass Games are examples of collectivistic unity. This show, which is held regularly in the huge Rungrado Stadium, involves performances of tens of thousands of people. Many participants are proud to perform for their people and country, even though it requires time-consuming exercises.

In an individualistic culture, people select their own marriage partners. In North Korea, the family is often involved in the selection process. Leisure is often a collective activity. The Western habit of going off to places alone, or of voluntarily spending time by oneself, seems strange to Koreans. If they go for a walk, they tend to go with a friend. Rather than being left to the individual to choose for themselves, entertainment is often provided, sometimes as a perk in the workplace. Actually, North Koreans are also used to getting jobs given by the government; this is not always an individual choice.

Individualism versus collectivism is about the strength of ties that people have to their community, and about the values placed on personal versus communal achievements. This cultural orientation answers the question: How do you see yourself first and foremost - as an individual, or as part of a larger group? People from individualist cultures (see Table 2 for rankings) have a high desire for personal freedom, privacy, personal time and personal challenges. Life, in their perception, centers around the individual and not around the group and they are expected to look out for themselves. There is a higher regard for assertiveness and confrontation in work situations. If nations develop economically, their middle- and upper-classes rapidly assimilate individualistic orientations.

For collectivists, group harmony is more important than personal ambition. The group can be the family, the extended family, the labour union, the organization, the Party. It is the source of one's identity, and it protects the individual who, in turn, is loyal to the group. At work, collectivists have a higher dependence on the organization and a stronger desire for non-financial rewards, such as physical conditions and benefits. In collectivistic societies, people prioritize the interests of their in-group compared to those of other groups. Trust in outsiders and tolerance of diversity are lower, which hampers cooperation at a level beyond the in-group.

A subset of Hofstede's rankings for this orientation appears in Table 2. It indicates that a country such as the Netherlands is very individualistic, while East Asia is much more collectivistic. It must be noted that no country is 100% collectivistic or 100% individualistic; every culture has elements of both individualism AND collectivism.

USA	91	Highly individualistic
Netherlands	80	
France	71	
Germany	67	
Russia	50	
India	48	
Japan	46	
South Korea	18	
Hong Kong	25	
Singapore	20	
China	20	Highly collectivistic

Table 2: Relationship orientation index.

In a collectivist country, relations and trust are important.
Cultures that are more collectivist focus more on relational trust and less on competence-based trust. And amid the collectivism of their daily lives, North Koreans learn how important personal relationships are. They usually have a small circle of friends whom they have known for many years – often old friends from high school, university or work. It is to these friends they turn for advice. Friends also have to be selected with great care: are they trustworthy? Criticism and frank speech are things that are at best confined to one's immediate family or closest friends. Trust is not easy to build in North Korea: people constantly have to regulate what they say, careful not to contravene boundaries or standards that are often unwritten.

At work, you trust your friends and people you already have a relationship with. When you don't know someone, you take a lot of time getting to know them to decide the kind of person they are, and uncover similarities between you, or people you know in common. This type of trust is common in cultures where success depends on your social position and good reputation in your social network.

Since Koreans are reluctant to deal with people they have never met, long phases of introduction can be required. But when mutual trust has been established, they can be loyal. The reciprocal factor is important for maintaining the relationship: no repay in the future is unforgivable.

Since people prefer doing business with those they know, they spend more time building relationships, and often blend personal and work life. When doing business in these cultures, socializing is essential to move things forward. This means that in North Korea, you must focus on relationship building with your local partners or with your local staff. This is less important in individualistic countries, but the Koreans must trust you, like you and respect you. They might even pick their partners not on quality, but on relationship: "If I know others well who trust you, then I trust you". They also pay attention to body language to gauge their potential business partner's motives and sincerity.

When a French textiles company was producing garments in North Korea, they sent their employees to the factory in Pyongyang on a regular basis, for quality control. Each time, this was a different person, and the Koreans started to complain: "we do not want to see different faces, we prefer to work with the same person".

In relationship-based cultures, there will be longer social-talk at the beginning of meetings. It is 'Cut to the chase and start with the agenda promptly' with task-based cultures: the leader from such a country wants to get started on tasks right away without any introductions, which makes the person from Korea feel uncomfortable, as they would like to get to know the person behind the voice to be able to work on a task together.

Building trust is much the same as anywhere else in the world: sincerity of purpose is vital. In addition to formal business meetings, a dinner followed by karaoke or a day trip out of town lets potential partners get to know each other outside an office setting. If the deal in question involves a large project, then meetings will include high-level officials and could convene at a ministry office.

Employees in a collectivist North Korea value relationships. They socialize at work, sacrifice for the team, speak tactfully and save face and want leaders and organizations to care for them. A problem arises when one of the partnering organizations comes from a culture with more individualist values. For example, North Koreans, growing up in a collective culture, use 'we' to describe their work. When a Western company wants to hire local staff, a frequent challenge for

Korean candidates is shifting from ‘we’ to ‘I’, when discussing personal achievements and contributions.

Their Western managers also expect their Korean staff to get things done efficiently, provide feedback and disagree openly, and have a clear separation between work and life. These managers must actively invite people to speak; arrange 1-on-1 meetings. They must often praise, recognize effort, and celebrate collective success. In addition: take the team to lunch and pay for it. It must be clear that North Korea is not interested in being pitied or patronized by foreigners. They do not want to be told what to do, and they want relationships based on mutual respect.

Felix Abt, who lived in the DPRK for seven years, remarked: “Part of my success owed to my willingness to work with local people, rather than pass judgment and get involved in politics. I built up a large network of contacts that helped shape our business for the socialist economy. Compare this approach to that of my predecessor, a close friend of the British ambassador, who was a staunch advocate of regime change. He didn’t get access, of course. While I could name off-hand the family background of my staff, he did not even know who the party secretary at my pharmaceutical company was—and a good relationship with that gate-keeping official is key to success. Also, influential connections, as I have learned in the years of doing business in other Asian countries before, are crucial in getting things done and problems solved in North Korea.”[7]

Relations to the bureaucracy are central and at the same time the most challenging variable in collaboration projects in North Korea. Personal connections are helpful to overcome certain obstacles, beginning with the possibility of e-mail communication[8], and to get more leeway for activities. Understanding the bureaucratic position is important, since it does not only reflect official ideology, but also the fear of sanctions by higher echelons of the bureaucracy.

Political support is a main factor of success, and this is true for support inside the country, though this is a variable out of control for most actors. It is also true for support from the outside, for example support by European politicians for EU-funded projects in North Korea. Political support is especially necessary to move away from technical or technological projects to projects related to the institutional system.[9]

Ironically, the North Korean theory of *Juche* (self-reliance) teaches a philosophy of independence, which can also hinders the spirit of cooperation. One way this is demonstrated is in departments acting in self-sufficiency. Communication between departments is lacking because each sector is expected to creatively solve problems on their own. This attitude can foster competition instead of cooperation. This poses a challenge when working with a North Korean organization: instead of local staff helping you to solve the problem, they will try to fix the problem on their own. It might take you considerable effort to convince them to share challenging situations with you.

3. Communication Orientation: High-Context versus Low-Context

Eric Cornell was a Swedish diplomat, who opened the Embassy of Sweden in North Korea in 1975 and served there until 1977. Having had many meetings in Pyongyang, he noted: “It should be emphasized that the discussions were conducted without the raising of voices, even though the

[7] Felix Abt. A capitalist in North Korea. My seven years in the Hermit Kingdom
[8] in general, foreigners cannot use North Korean personal email addresses, only shared group email addresses
[9] Gung-Jo Park, in: Europe - North Korea. Between Humanitarism and Business?

North Koreans' choice of words could sometimes seem decidedly brusque to a Westerner. I soon came to realize that variations in the 'negotiating climate' were expressed with the help of subtle Oriental hints which may well be the norm in East Asian contexts but which a Westerner could easily fail to detect. The simplest and perhaps most palpable examples consisted of long, drawn-out, tiring, and for Westerners, rather meaningless assertions of friendship and mutual appreciation. I now came to understand that they were an extremely important element of the negotiating process. By-passing them was something that could not be excused by being in a hurry or by a desire to get down to the nitty-gritty straight away'.[10]

Andray Abrahamian is an advisor to Choson Exchange, a non-profit that trains North Koreans in economic policy and entrepreneurship, and went to the DPRK nearly 30 times. Once, after conducting a training, he wanted to enjoy a run in the northern city Rason. "I am going for a run on the little hill behind the hotel" he announced to the lady who manned the lobby shop in the hotel. "Why not run on the road in front of the hotel", she kindly suggested. "I prefer running on hills", Andray said. "I think the road is better", she replied. "Well, thanks for the advice, but I will just do the hill", he thought. It was a few minutes later, when a soldier was grasping his rifle and yelling at me, that I'd realized I had run myself into a cultural understanding. She had not wanted to firmly tell me not to go around the back of the hotel, and I was too stupid to realize she was telling me not to go around the back of the hotel. Now I was facing a man wielding an assault rifle with a bayonet affixed to it.[11]

Felix Abt, who met plenty of foreigners during his seven years in Pyongyang, wrote: "Foreigners often remarked to me, in exasperation, that they couldn't figure what the furtive North Koreans expected from them. The country, and its practices, was a break from anything they were familiar with back home. Business dealings were generally non-transparent, and this tendency caused outsiders to make wild assumptions about their partners. The results were foolish speculation and faulty assessments – two hindrances to getting any work done. To North Koreans, though, the intentions of the foreigners were also unclear – although they were, by and large, better informed about outsiders from their own work experience and perhaps thanks to their quasi intelligence gathering. There was a typical story that unfolded: business partners were in high spirits after dining together at their welcoming dinners. They shared the confidence that their projects would be successful. But frequently, misunderstandings, suspicions and frustrations emerged. Even seasoned executives, representing multinational corporations and with experience working in remote cultures, lost their temper".[12]

The American Edward Hall described the different ways how information is transmitted or communicated: this can be more, or less, specific and explicit. Northern Europeans and Americans are low-context cultures, where all information is explicitly verbalized. North Korea (as many other Asian cultures) is a high-context country, where implicit information is not verbalized and messages are expressed indirectly. For example, in the United States, one might say "I don't agree with your point", while in North Korea or Japan, the same message would be conveyed more indirectly: "it is hard to agree with your point", or "we will review it". This difference stems from cultural contexts where people in high-context cultures aim to convey negative messages without hurting the other person's feelings.

[10] Eric Cornell. North Korea under communism. Report of an Envoy to Paradise
[11] Abrahamian, Andray. Being in North Korea
[12] Felix Abt. A capitalist in North Korea. My seven years in the Hermit Kingdom

People in low-context cultures typically:

- rely on the spoken or written word to communicate meaning ('say what you mean, and mean what you say'). They listen more for *what* is said rather than *how* it is said.
- prefer explicit formulations and rules, direct, sometimes frank speech
- usually aim at efficiency, concise use of words, and elaboration of unclear meanings
- value being articulate and clear
- consider detailed writing helpful and often necessary
- value documents and contracts, to be signed as legal and binding for each partner equally (objectively).

People in high-context cultures such as North Korea typically:

- rely more on non-verbal aspects to communicate meaning (including facial expressions or gestures)
- prefer implicit, indirect communication
- usually consider situational factors more important than what is actually being said
- value relational trust as more important than specified contents (words are treated flexibly, contracts are changeable as long as a relationship is in place)
- consider in-group membership and "we-talk" towards building relational closeness (subjectively).

While no culture is entirely one or the other, the high- and low-context distinction can broadly illustrate communication style preferences within and across cultures, from how we greet each other to how we negotiate business partnerships. They also affect the performance of students and expectations of teachers, and a variety of contrastive preferences in political, legal, business and social communication.

North Koreans tend to rely less on words and are attentive to a speaker's posture, expression and tone of voice to draw meaning. Speech can be ambiguous as they often understate their point. The purpose of this is to maintain harmony throughout the conversation and prevent a loss of face on either end of the exchange. The best way of navigating this rhetoric to find the underlying meaning is to check for clarification several times through open-ended questions.

Most Asians, including Koreans, place great importance on the overall setting of negotiations. For Asians, a negotiated deal is impossible without personal bonds between the negotiators. Low-context Americans, by contrast, are said to focus on the bottom line and on abstract rules and laws, with little regard for cultural sensitivities and diplomatic niceties.

This could already be observed in the early negotiations between the DPRK and the US. Walter Clemens[13] described that the diplomatic breakthroughs in U.S.-DPRK relations in the 1990s were initiated thanks to personal contacts: firstly, between Reverend Billy Graham and Kim II Sung; secondly, a June 1994 meeting between scholar Selig Harrison from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace with Kim II Sung, and thirdly, a tête-à-tête later that month between former U.S. president Jimmy Carter and Kim Il Sung. These unofficial contacts of 'Track II diplomacy' laid the groundwork for subsequent 'Track I' negotiations by government officials. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright observed: "North Korea's top-down decision-making style didn't fit well with our practice of trying to 'pre-cook' arrangements before committing the President." Far from trying to establish personal bonds or helping North Koreans to save face in difficult times, the Bush team repeatedly insulted the DPRK regime and its leader. Any government concerned with

[13] Walter Clemens, The role of culture in WMD-negotiations with the North, (2005)

"face" would balk at demands that it ‘confess’ to wrongdoing and make unilateral concessions. Not surprisingly, when Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton, the top State Department official responsible for arms control, called Kim Jong-il a ‘tyrannical rogue’ in August 2003, Pyongyang replied by branding him ‘human scum.’ But Koreans (both South and North) as well as Americans can be polite and friendly if they wish - or the opposite. Whereas bad vibes can kill a prospective accord, good vibes can help to reach and maintain one. Nevertheless, a cordial atmosphere is surely not sufficient for a deal. On balance, cultural differences probably played a supporting but not a decisive role in the U.S.-DPRK conflicts that erupted after Bush entered the White House.

The North Korean’s preoccupation with saving face and politeness means that they will seldom give a flat ‘no’ or negative response, even when they don’t agree with you. They will say: “this could be an interesting idea. Let us think about it more”. In Europe, we will say ‘no’, but this is often considered painful in Korea, also because of avoiding a ‘saving face’ situation. This makes it not always easy to decide what is feasible. Therefore, focus on hints of hesitation, listening to what they say, but also paying careful attention to what they subtly imply (‘reading between the lines’). Try to collect additional information and ask others for advice. Sometimes you get the feeling that something is wrong, but it is not really clear. In that case, it might be useful to invite your Korean partners for a coffee or a beer. In a more relaxed atmosphere, it will be easier to discover their real thoughts.

Also, the word “yes” does not mean a North Korean agrees: she or he may be confirming what was heard, or showing respect even if he or she did not understand the English. Straight talk, and “calling a spade a spade,” is generally valued by Westerners but not by North Koreans and other Asians. It may threaten another person’s face or the group’s harmony (and if harmony is important, then setting a deadlines might not work). And to go into an even deeper area, displays of anger are considered offensive by North Koreans. Such a debacle would cause a loss of “face,” which is a serious matter in this region that values the self-worth of every human being. Patience, calm and humour can help overcome the most challenging and unnerving situations.

Nevertheless, some European businesspersons prefer doing business in the DPRK over China because the Koreans are more direct than the Chinese. Also, in modern sectors such as Information Technology, it has been observed that it is relatively easier to have work-related conversations in the DPRK than in countries such as India, as Korean programmers were more inclined to speak plainly than to say what they thought the boss wanted to hear.

In a multicultural or international team, we use low-context processes as much as possible so that the messages are explicit, and the risk of misinterpretation is minimized. E-mail is more natural for low-context cultures, since they logically look at the information contained in the text of the message. North Koreans, however, often need peripheral information, which is lacking in e-mail messages.

A long-term approach is needed

Successful collaboration with the DPRK can sometimes be achieved on a relatively short notice. This depends on the type of collaboration, for example in the field of garment production (this trade is now sanctioned). Often during a first business mission, the selected Korean textile companies were able to produce samples based on the requirements of the European client. After the final selection of the factory, a second visit could be sufficient to arrange the preparations of

the production in detail. The communication needed between the two parties took place between a few people, was relatively limited and mostly about technical and commercial issues (although the logistics involved could be complicated). When both sides are eager to conduct these types of trade, the impact of cultural differences is relatively limited.

In general, however, successful actions in North Korea might need a longer preparation time, compared to those in other countries. The initial period of building trust and demonstrating credibility takes much longer in North Korea. Engagement is also a pendulum that may swing from one end to the other, due to changing political decisions inside and outside the DPRK. The closure of the borders is a recent example that active patience is needed: North Korea was the first country in the world to seal its borders after the start of the Covid pandemic in early 2020, but after more than four years, these are still closed…

Building personal relationships in such a complex and nuanced operating environment is both the greatest challenge and the most important factor for success. Foreigners should encompass transparency and trust in their interactions with North Korean partners and colleagues, as this will then improve collaboration in the field. When building trust, the key Korean concept is 'sincerity' on the part of the organization and its representatives. None of this is different from ways of building trust in other cultures; it is just extremely important in North Korea, and it may take more time.

The most important personal relationships are those with the political and technical counterparts with whom we work on a day-to-day basis. Expressing sympathy for their situation, even when they deliver bad news, can help control frustration. Patience and an even temper will be rewarded, since many consider North Korea a 'no' society: "everything is not allowed, apart from the things which are allowed - you will have to get used to it". Unless something is explicitly permitted, it is best to act as if it is forbidden, just to be on the safe side - until you are told it is allowed. Also, unlike many other places, when things are forbidden, you are not entitled to an explanation. ('Why?' is a question only a foreigner would ever ask). The system sets up barrier after barrier and if you have to live and work in it, you can't let yourself be constantly disappointed and frustrated. The process of moving something from the No-word to the Yes-word is slow and can be extremely frustrating.

Both sides need to build trust – and that takes time, effort and commitment. While long-term partnerships help maintain trust on an organizational level, trust on the interpersonal level takes time, often on the scale of years, to develop. Once a relationship is founded, it must be maintained, and that is hard for those not based in-country. Many things are better decided face to face because deep conversations via email or over the phone are not feasible. The preference for face-to-face communication is more cultural in North Korea and will be more effective. This means that regular visits should be conducted (and stay a few days more to arrange for informal communication).

Most formal meetings will take place at offices, but it is useful to consider informal meetings as well. In an informal atmosphere, foreigners and Koreans will get much closer; a bond that sometimes achieves better results. There are various locations available, both inside and outside Pyongyang. Sometimes, foreigners can use their Embassy to invite their Korean guests.

When the cooperation develops, it is useful to invite your Korean partners to your country, so they can meet your local staff, familiarize themselves with your organization and understand its context and surroundings. To improve the collaboration, you can also propose specialized

trainings (e.g. hiring English teachers for language instruction to individuals or small groups at your partner organization) or offering a scholarship or short course outside North Korea.

Offering training does not have to be confined to your partner organization; it can also be given to a larger group, thus extending your network. This will be useful, especially since foreigners are generally stuck with working with a single partner organization. Organizing trainings, seminars or workshops allows for greater interaction with a wider range of Koreans than otherwise. Depending on the topic, it is possible to invite officials from various ministries, representatives from small and large companies, and academics from a range of institutions as participants. The European Business Association (EBA), which was founded in 2005 by 12 resident foreign business people representing European businesses in North Korea, always invited Koreans from various sectors during their public events, thus expanding their network.

Greater flexibility, patience, and a willingness to build genuine partnerships have allowed some foreign organizations to build decades-long relationships and projects. Koryo Tours is based in Beijing, and organizes trips for tourists to the DPRK for more than 30 years. Simon Cockerell is General Manager of Koryo Tours and has traveled to North Korea more than 175 times. He noted: "When it comes to coming up with ideas, for new procedures and new tours, these usually come from our side. However, the way that getting permission for things works remains somewhat elusive; we can only push the people we know. And they in turn can only push one more step up the ladder, then it disappears into the mist; sometimes we know how high up it has to go to get permission, and sometimes we don't, but it only takes the person on one rung of his metaphorical ladder to stop any ideas, but this is not something that we let discourage us too much; we just start the process again. The gap between expectations and what is realistic possible (by both sides) can be huge. Being stubborn, persuasive, and developing a thick-skin for disappointment is a key part of this job."[14] Nevertheless, over the years, Koryo Tours succeeded in extending their work: from only tourist trips to newer types of experiences: sports events (e.g. football, marathon), cultural activities (making documentaries and even a romantic comedy), publishing and art collection.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) means taking responsibility for the impact of your business operation on people, the environment and society. You make sure your business does not have a negative impact and you address or prevent poor working conditions, environmental pollution, and poverty. Companies should not go to North Korea for business only, but could initiate CSR project as well. Examples in this field are Young Pioneer Tours (YPT) and Koryo Tours, which are raising funds for a charity project in Pyongyang, funding and operating the country's first school for deaf children.

Having built a long-term relationship with North Koran partners even gives the option to suggest unconventional projects. An example is the performance of the controversial Slovenian hard rock group Laibach in August 2015 in Pyongyang. The visit was arranged by Norwegian artist Morten Traavik, who had already done cultural exchanges with North Korea previously and been in the country more than 15 times. Nevertheless, suspicion accompanied the event and its organizers throughout. This was never more explicit than when as the Korean host made a speech to the band and crew on the day of arrival: "Laibach is a terrible rock group, that in its music videos uses pornography. Indeed, this group is considered as Neo-Nazi supporting Hitler-style scenery and clothing, also insulting different religions." He goes on to cover the group's perceived fascist style and how it "laughs and jokes" about dictatorships: "How can fascist people be invited for the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation? If Laibach visited the DPRK, they

[14] Kyungnam University, IFES, Doing Business in North Korea: Opportunities and Challenges

would carry out a provocation and harm its socialist system." It was no surprise that organizing the performance of the band was complicated, but there was just sufficient trust to have the Laibach band perform – although one can doubt if the Korean audience enjoyed the noisy performance. Morten Traavik concluded at the end: "It was human trust which kept the project going; you can get something done that is totally weird"[15].

Various

The preparation to collaborate

Preparing a first visit

- buy and read books about the experiences of foreigners when living and working inside North Korea. Try to talk to someone with experience in dealing with North Korea (e.g. an expat who lived and worked in the country); they can help you understand how those of other cultures perceive you
- the presence of North Korean companies and organizations on the Internet is slowly growing, but still limited. Despite email addresses being listed on the Korean websites, it is still necessary to ask for an introduction and to have your email address registered; otherwise your emails will bounce back
- because of its nuclear and ballistic missile-related activities, there are restrictive measures introduced against the DPRK. Although international cooperation and trade is still allowed in various sectors, it is important to assess the potential impact of these sanctions (e.g. EU and UN Security Council sanctions)
- begin with an introduction visit. For this, you will need a local organization as your official host. Potential hosts can be found through the network of specialized consultants, through the DPRK Embassy in your country, or through persons already dealing with North Korea. But note that this North Korean organization will also use their personal network to make local introductions – this might not give you the best potential partners. Try to arrange many meetings with different people and organizations
- a study tour or business trip to North Korea is exhausting and everything takes more energy than at home. It is therefore advisable to take your time for a visit. If possible, do not explore the country alone during your initial exploration. To be able to ask the right questions and appreciate your observations and insights, it makes sense to travel with others - preferably people with North Korea experience
- working with Koreans abroad (working and living in China) might give you additional useful contacts. Ethnic Koreans in China also have a huge advantage: they speak both Korean and Chinese, and have contacts and understand the customs of both countries
- try attending industry networking events in North Korea (e.g. the Pyongyang International Trade Fair) or the International Trade Fair in the Special Economic Zone of Rason.

Finding a capable local partner is crucial

Simon Cockerell from Koryo Tours: "For anyone looking to do any kind of business in North Korea, the single soundest piece of advice I can offer would be to find a very good local partner; operating without a partner is not possible, but you don't simply assign one by some central authority, you find one you want to work with, and get to know them. As they are your man on

[15] see the documentary made by VFS films: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDKOINl0L4I

the ground, you need to have the highest degree of trust and understanding with them, work with them, go out with them, argue with them, learn about their family, get drunk with them, sing songs with them, buy them a birthday present, and stay in contact as much as possible – this may seem like simply advice for anywhere, and that may be so, but this is definitely what I would advise for anyone working with North Koreans. It's important to keep in close contact with your partner there, to remind them that details that they think may not be interesting or relevant should still be passed along, that you want to know as much as possible, and that you're invested in what it is you are working on with them. To make a true 'friend' there is difficult with all the barriers to interaction with them (not going to their homes for dinner for example), and the cultural divides and so on, but it can be done and when it succeeds the business will benefit".[16]

North Koreans are eager for foreign investment, and they're savvy enough to research their potential partners. Usually, they know at least what is accessible on the Internet about their foreign counterparts. And they systematically collect information during both formal meetings and informal talks to bolster their knowledge. This can be to their advantage at the negotiating table, since it's difficult for foreigners to gather information within the DPRK.

The foreign organization and the North Korean counterparts should clearly define success indicators and measure them jointly, to show good (yet realistic) impacts. It must be realized that the local conditions differ from those of other countries and contexts. A risk analysis - including political (e.g. sanctions), operational, environmental and social dimensions - should be conducted before each larger action. Small and low-risk projects can often be started on a shorter notice.

A foreigner is dependent on his local partner for visas, permits and information, so trust is vital. If a dispute arises, there is not always hope of legal redress, as it is often up to the local partner to raise the issue with authorities. It's wise to build multiple relationships, as there are many reasons (e.g. sickness, finding another job, old age) that can compromise a single connection.

Learning from others

When preparing to collaborate, it is useful to learn from the experiences of others. One of the few American academic collaborative projects with a North Korean university was between Syracuse University in the United Stated and Kim Chaek University of Technology (KUT) in Pyongyang. The discussions began in late spring 2001 with representatives of the DPRK UN Mission in New York. This led in March 2002 to the establishment of bilateral research collaborations in the general area of integrated information technology. The research focused on adapting open source software to develop a library management system for the new KUT digital library. As part of the project, various research exchanges took place, in different countries. The following Lessons Learned have been described: [17]

- *Institutional commitment:* the willingness of the leadership of the various organizations involved to visibly commit both themselves and key resources of their organizations to the collaboration helped greatly to provide a 'safe' environment in which the scholarly work could move forward
- *Face-to-face is critical*: early in-person discussions between people involved provided a context in which priorities and constraints could be discussed in an increasingly open manner
- *Trusted communications:* over time, moving as slowly as necessary enabled the two teams to increasingly trust the communications between them. This made it possible to

[16] Building Business Relationships in the DPRK Tourism Industry. In: Doing Business in North Korea
[17] Kim Chaek University of Technology - Syracuse University Summary. Status Report

negotiate difficult issues with generally good humour and to ask clarifying questions as issues arose rather than waiting until questions became problems

- *Unanticipated benefits flow:* as the frequency of exchanges mounts, the DPRK proposed new activities unrelated to the primary focus of the collaboration. Additional projects could be initiated (e.g. a training on technical English; social and cultural events; an advanced cardiology training for a delegation of surgeons from a hospital in Pyongyang)
- *Informal communications are very important:* often the unplanned discussions are as significant as the formal planned ones. Informal meals have provided a congenial and productive environment for such conversations
- *Put it in writing:* even with the best of intentions and good will it is possible for misunderstandings to arise. Slogging through the development of jointly acceptable written documents is almost always helpful in this regard
- *Be in it for the long haul and be prepared for bumps*: it soon became apparent to both the American and Korean researchers that if this relationship were going to work, everyone had to be committed to the long haul
- *Share information appropriately*: the DPRK and the US have different philosophies and practices regarding the sharing of information. It has been important to simultaneously respect those differences and, at the same time, be honest brokers of information
- *Don't over commit*: a sense of trust often flows from a history of reliable interactions. In this regard, meeting deadlines, clearly identifying risk factors, and establishing clear project milestones have all helped keep the collaboration moving forward
- *Consistency of participation matters:* the collaboration has benefited greatly from the willingness of Syracuse University and Kim Chaek University of Technology to permit the continuous participation of key people
- *Importance of shared governance*: in sustained collaborations, questions of priorities, future directions, and resource development are bound to arise. It is therefore very useful to have a shared governance structure in place to systematically, legitimately, and proactively deal with those issues.

Challenges in communication

Encounters with Koreans

North Koreans are quite conservative, and they do not have the custom of making small talk with strangers. The kind of random conversations on the street or on buses that are common in other Asian countries are much more difficult in the DPRK. North Koreans have been systematically sensitized to the so-called threat of having contact with foreigners. They are not likely to confide very much in a foreigner, when they have been taught their entire life that foreigners are potentially enemy agents. In addition, what also happen is shyness and, more usually, a lack of fluency in a language besides Korean.

But this does not mean there are no interactions with strangers. Foreigners walking in Moranbong Park are sometimes invited to join the public dancing in the weekends. Taking part in an outdoor picnic or play badminton together is also beneficial for nurturing openness and changed attitudes. And unlike adults, the children of Pyongyang did not restrain themselves when approaching foreigners to practice English.

Lindsey Miller, whose husband worked at the British Embassy, lived in Pyongyang from 2017 to 2019. Talking to interpreters, drivers, waiters and cleaners who worked around the city, she found many were fearful of their conversations being misinterpreted by watching eyes - often ignoring or outright rejecting her. Over time, the isolation began to overwhelm Lindsey. She became

fearful that those who did try to befriend her had ulterior motives. “How much could I really trust these people?” she wonders. “This question would haunt me for the entire time I was there. I struggled to separate the human being in front of me from their environment. I will talk about an example of meeting a girl in a shop. It was just a random shop, a random day of the week. She spoke Spanish and I speak Spanish as well. We had a nice conversation in Spanish, and we got on really well. In that situation, I would give someone my number and, say, ask to go for coffee. But that wasn't possible because foreigners' cell phone networks are separated from North Korean people's cell phone networks. So even in those instances where you meet North Korean people and connect with them, it's not possible to continue on a relationship.”[18] These difficulties in making informal contacts with random people are especially a problem if you have to spend a long period of time in the country.

Guides and translators

Visiting foreigners are always accompanied by two North Korean guides (sometimes described as minders) from the moment they step off the plane in Pyongyang, until the end of their tightly predefined program. Some consider them a hassle, but they are important in setting up relevant meetings. A guide can make or break your work in the country, and a good relationship can open roads to new opportunities and help you succeed even in the midst of challenging circumstances. Although they are part of a system of constraints, they can also gently push against those constraints; they are often working with you to accomplish shared goals despite being in a system stacked with barriers to success. Most guides are fine and you can establish a friendly relationship.

These guides (or the translators) might not be familiar with your professional activities, so a thorough preparation is important to be able to collaborate effectively and to make the interpretation sessions more successful. Interpreters should be involved in the briefing, understanding the context deeply. An interpreter can understand if the Korean side does or does not understand the discussions. He or she can also highlight the significance of understanding relationships before delivering bad news, or suggest a more casual encounter before serious discussions for smoother communication.

Guides are not required for resident foreigners, who have much more freedom and can shop and dine almost anywhere. They can walk or drive alone 24/7 in the capital and could even travel alone to the port city of Nampo. They are also allowed to freely circulate without minders within a 35 km radius of Pyongyang.

No confrontation but saving face

There are differences between cultures in how people express their emotions. In North Korea, showing affection and emotions in public is not welcome (although it sometimes happens). Face-saving is an important concept in the collectivist Korean culture, and it is essentially the value of avoiding humiliation and preserving dignity, even when it is difficult to do so. Koreans do not like to admit to something that does not look good because it makes them even feel ashamed, and they ‘lose face’. Face can be earned and lost. As a foreigner, be careful with criticizing people in a group: this should be done individually.[19] Westerners sometimes regard ‘losing face’ as a simple case of personal embarrassment, and feelings of guilt usually enter the spectrum. However, 'losing face' in many Eastern cultures invokes feelings of shame, and this is felt by any team members who may be directly involved. Actions or words that are considered disrespectful

[18] Lindsey Miller. North Korea: Like Nowhere Else

[19] there are certain exceptions for North Koreans, for example when criticism and self-criticism sessions are held at the workplace or at school

in Eastern cultures may cause the lowering of a persons' standing, and this leads to shame in the eyes of peers. ‘Face’ keeps relationships intact, it maintains group harmony and it promotes group solidarity. If one person loses face, the whole group is impacted.

There are several techniques in preserving the face. During a conversation, you just subtly change the subject. If you cannot achieve your objective when you have a delicate issue, then use intermediaries (e.g. an accountant, a lawyer, or one of your contacts in your business network). This way, you try to achieve your objectives behind the scene (remember that face has a long-term orientation). Another part of the concept of face is that you should not expect a ‘no’ for an answer. To say ‘no’ is rude and will therefore cause embarrassment. This means you should formulate your question always in such a manner as to avoid the other party to say ‘no’. This also happens if the boss is angry: he will not confront you, but via others.

Other strategies for disagreeing: play with language, consider using down-graders or softer language such as “I do not quite understand your point” or “Please explain more about why you think that” instead of “I don’t agree”. Another strategy is to explicitly call out your intention before stating a disagreement, e.g. “Let me play devil’s advocate so that we can explore both sides …”

Felix Abt ran a pharmaceuticals company in Pyongyang and when he left, he was replaced by a young Belgian manager, who spoke Korean. Abt observed: “But his Korean language skills didn’t help him. Because he was confrontational, and lacked respect for the older and wiser staff, he clashed during the first few days in Pyongyang with the North Koreans. The Koreans, offended and angry, approached me before I packed my bags: “We have never experienced such an ignorant and arrogant foreigner. We want to get rid of him!” announced one assistant manager at the pharmacy.”

Dealing with sensitive topics

Andray Abrahamian, who conducted trainings in North Korea: “Koreans can verbally dance around sensitive subjects. They often speak in a sort of code that hints at hopes or dissatisfaction that are too risky to express fully. So much of holding discussions with North Koreans involves coloring in the spaces they leave behind. The more you do it and the greater context you have, the more accurate you become.”

Lindsey Miller, who lived in Pyongyang for several years: “When meeting people, there was never a clear line between authenticity and falseness. Was the person you were speaking to genuinely interested, or had they been tasked with ulterior motives? So unclear if you could trust this person. And you also try to avoid sensitive topics. Fellow foreigners eager to tantalise locals with stories about Facebook, Amazon or other details of Western society quickly realised they not only knew about such things, but were far from in awe of them. Foreigners often failed to realise that the Koreans we were speaking to undoubtedly already knew the information we were so eager to impart and had probably been ideologically armoured against it, or at least were numb as to why they should care,” Lindsey says. “One Korean friend told me once that she was fed up with hearing about Facebook and told one foreigner to shut up when he kept going on about the free internet.” [20]

North Korean hosts appreciate genuine interest from foreigners, but internationals working with Koreans should respect that they are the experts of their own lives and often know how to improve their situation. International staff must work with sensitivity and respect, as they are

[20] Lindsey Miller. North Korea: Like Nowhere Else

often a key ‘window to the world’ for North Koreans. Outsiders can discuss controversial topics as long as they do not ‘teach’ or try to ‘save’ their hosts. “Christian NGOs were frequently able to negotiate more effectively with the DPRK and respond more directly to needs as they arose because they implemented their programmes apart from political considerations and did not draw attention to their efforts”.[21]

Former British Ambassador John Everard observed during his stay: “Equally deplorable is the attitude of many NGOs who treat North Koreans as if they were children. I was horrified to visit an aid project at which I found senior members of the NGO involved striding around directing Koreans to do this and to do that in the best tradition of imperial memsahibs. Koreans are usually far too polite to argue with important foreigners in these situations, but they resent being talked down to just as deeply as Westerners would if the boot were on the other foot. Fortunately, such foreigners were in a minority.”

Trust is slow to build and fast to break

Building a relationship with your partners or with your local staff in North Korea is important, but can take a long time. Unfortunately, breaking this trust can be achieved rapidly.

Dutch stamp collector William van der Bijl has been selling North Korean stamps from his shop in Utrecht since 1994. He visited the country 24 times, opened a branch office in Pyongyang, and also collects Korean paintings and posters. He owns one of the largest collections of DPRK propaganda posters outside the country. During his visit in July 2011, he broke the Korean law and was detained for two weeks. In this period, he celebrated his 60th birthday (60 is a special milestone event for Koreans). He was expelled from the country and is not allowed to return to North Korea - leaving behind friends and his stamp trading post. Having a long history and a network could not prevent him from being arrested – although it might have helped him to a certain extent, since he was only expelled: a moderate punishment given the specific law he broke.

Another example is Alek Sigley from Australia, who first visited North Korea in 2012 and is fluent in Korean. In 2013, he established his own tour agency, Tongil Tours, offering various tours in the country. In April 2018, he was accepted into Kim Il Sung University, where he started his studies in Korean literature. He lived at the university's foreign student dormitory while working on a thesis on contemporary North Korean fiction. In June 2019, he was detained for nine days, accused of spying, and expelled from the country after Swedish officials helped broker his release. His mistake was that he started writing articles and publishing pictures on the website of NKNews, an American press agency which receives funding from the US government and which the North Koreans dislike. They expect transparency, and a student acting as a journalist will always cause suspicion. As a matter of fact, NKNews should never have asked a foreign student living in Pyongyang to become a contributor.

It must also be noted that mistakes can have other consequences as well. Unintended or intended actions of foreigners can have an impact on North Korean’s careers and livelihoods (or worse). North Koreans such as guides or associates can be held responsible for the actions of their non-Korean partners by the country’s extensive security apparatus.

[21] Gung-Jo Park, in: Europe - North Korea. Between Humanitarism and Business?

Business Etiquette

There are some differences in business etiquette – although foreigners are not always expected to be aware of these:

- In meetings with Korean business partners or managers, one has to be less direct and respect hierarchy. Sometimes, only the most high-ranking guest (or guests, if several had the same rank) and the host make conversation; the others observe a respectful silence
- Under this hierarchy, you would therefore not pour your own drink but pour for others at the table first - starting with the oldest or most senior ones. Ladies do not go first, as in the Western tradition. You always pour for each other, following the Korean tradition of never serving yourself
- Make sure to give your business card using two hands and ensure the text is facing the recipient. Receive your card attentively and examine it for a moment to show respect. Always present your cards to the highest-ranking individual first
- In a sign of respect, people should not be waved over with fingers crooked upwards but with the palm down
- In conversations, when referring to the country, use 'DPRK' and try to avoid using 'North Korea'
- Gift-giving is unusual in a Western business culture, but is a common practice in North Korea and often seen as a sign of respect and goodwill. You can consider bringing cigarettes, foreign drinks or good quality chocolates.
- Do not expect to be introduced to the families of your partners, or to visit them at their homes
- At a young age, North Koreans learn to sing, and love to do so their entire lives. The repertoire they are taught focuses on songs of praise for the revolution and the leaders. They even greet foreigners at farms and factories by singing national themes as a choir. This is quite embarrassing for foreigners, who aren't trained to sing equally well when they are asked to sing in turn. Restaurants are also full of highly popular karaoke rooms
- As a foreigner, being able to speak the Korean language is an advantage. The options of having discussions without the use of an interpreter improves communication, and makes it easier for Korean so speak with you. However, in most cases, you might only be able to say 'cheers' or 'hello' in Korean. In case you have some spare time available, you might consider joining a Pyongyang Summer Language Program.

Conclusion

In January 2020, the DPRK was the first country in the world to seal its borders after the start of the Covid pandemic. At the moment of writing, it is still closed for most foreigners, but the expectation is that it will gradually re-open. Despite the sanctions, there are various opportunities in North Korea for collaboration in business, education, culture, humanitarian work and tourism.

It is now the time to explore these options for cooperation and engagement, and above all people-to-people contacts. This will take place in a challenging environment. The North Koreans you will meet are often friendly, hospitable and with a good sense of humour, but mutual goodwill is not sufficient. We have to deal with political and ideological differences, and also with a vast cultural divide.

Compared with Western European countries, it has a high power distance and is also one of the most collectivist cultures on earth. In these circumstances, relations, networks and trust are the keywords. Building these relationships will take time, and communicating within the Korean high-context culture will require additional efforts.

You must try to understand the different cultures, but you will also have to stay authentic. In this regard, making mistakes will be unavoidable. Inside the DPRK, it's not just a matter of adapting to the North Korean way; cultural exchange could also be a two-way street, especially if the relationship with the Koreans is evolving. Perhaps we could even try to combine opposites: "If you are an individualist without collectivism, you are an egoist and it doesn't work. If you are a collectivist without connecting yourself to an individual, it doesn't work either."

Literature

Abrahamian, Andray. Being in North Korea (2020)
Abt, Felix. A capitalist in North Korea. My seven years in the Hermit Kingdom (2014)
Abt, Felix. Behind the veil ((2017)
Campbell, Emma. Famine in North Korea: humanitarian policy in the late 1990s (2015)
Clemens, Walter C. Jr. The role of culture in WMD-negotiations with the North (2005)
Cornell, Eric. North Korea under communism. Report of an Envoy to Paradise (2002)
Everard, John. Only beautiful please. A British diplomat in North Korea (2012)
Ford, Glyn. Talking to North Korea (2018)
Hall, Edward T. The Silent Language (1959)
Hofstede, Geert. Culture's consequences (1980)
Jeppesen, Travis. See you again Pyongyang. A journey into Kim Jong Un's North Korea (2018)
Kim Chaek University of Technology - Syracuse University Summary. Status Report (2005)
Kyungnam University, Doing Business in North Korea: Opportunities and Challenges (2015)
Meyer, Erin. The Culture Map (2015)
Miller, Lindsey. North Korea: Like Nowhere Else (2021)
Park, Myungkyu, Seliger, Bernhard, Park Sung-jo (Eds.). Europe - North Korea. Between Humanitarism and Business? (2010)
Reed, Edward. Unlikely partners in the quest for Juche. Humanitarian Aid Agencies in North Korea (2004)
Tjia, Paul and Carmel, Erran. Offshoring Information Technology. Sourcing and Outsourcing to a Global Workforce (2005)
Tjia, Paul. Inside the Hermit Kingdom: IT and Outsourcing in North Korea (2012)
Tjia, Paul. Garment Production in North Korea (2017)
Tjia, Paul. Outsourcing to North Korea: animation (2018)
Trompenaars, Fons and Hampden-Turner, Charles. Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business (1993)
Verluyten, S. Paul. Intercultural Communication in Business and Organizations (2002)
Yoon, Joy. Discovering Joy. Ten Years in North Korea (2021)

About the author

Paul Tjia studied Information Technology and Cultural Anthropology in the Netherlands. In 1995, he founded GPI Consultancy, a consultancy firm in the field of international IT outsourcing.

He organizes IT-missions to various countries in Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. He has contacts with companies from North Korea as from 1996; his first visit was in 2006. On a regular basis, he is involved in arranging to the DPRK for different types of participants (e.g. journalists, academics and business).

GPI Consultancy, P.O. Box 26151, 3002 ED Rotterdam, the Netherlands
Tel.: +31-10-4254172 E-mail: info@gpic.nl Web: www.gpic.nl
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/paul-tjia-9584451 Twitter: twitter.com/PaulTjia