Cultural differences when dealing with North Koreans

Paul Tjia, February 2024

Until the 1990s, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had very limited collaboration and contacts with the USA or Western Europe. 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, a large number of Western humanitarian NGOs entered the country. These organizations quickly faced a series of impediments, including poor-quality data, 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.

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 often limited. This was exacerbated by a chronic lack of local knowledge and the technical inability of local staff to carry out basic procedures such as data collection and reporting. This 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.

We are now more than twenty-five years later, and a large number of Americans and Europeans have been involved in collaboration projects with North Koreans, even though the geopolitical situation and the different political systems still create complicated challenges. Compared with the past, many books and articles are now available about North Korea, and they include a wide range of issues. However, one topic is often missing: the cultural differences when communicating with North Koreans. In a challenging environment, being able to deal with cultural issues can make an important positive difference.

Cultural differences 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 had a negative effect on the quality of the projects. For some clients, 'India' even became an abbreviation for: 'I Never Do It Again'. For this reason, together with an Indian colleague, 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.

The cultural divide with North Korea is vast. Many professionals dealing with this country are relatively new to the topic of culture or lack situational awareness. As soon as the borders re-open, foreign students will enroll courses in Pyongyang, European academics will collaborate with Korean universities, business people will trade with Korean companies and diplomats will engage in negotiations. They will all have intensive personal communication with North Koreans, and it will be important for them to find ways to create common ground between the different cultures and ideologies. Since there is limited information available about this topic, I have decided to write this article. It will be available in April 2024, and input is welcome.

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