The Times, September 28, 2018

PYONGYANG DISPATCH

Something extraordinary is happening in North Korea, and it has happened with great speed

The signs are small but unmistakable: Kim Jong-un, against all expectations, is taking his country in a direction that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Richard Lloyd Parry reports from Pyongyang

A pizza restaurant in Pyongyang, where fried chicken, burgers and even steaks are available to an emerging middle class at a price TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

Of all the many remarkable changes to have come to Pyongyang, the most striking is the disappearance of the ugly Americans. They used to be a feature of the city — stereotypical Yankee imperialists, invariably depicted with hook noses and in attitudes of grotesque humiliation, on posters and billboards, by roadsides and in museums.

There were US soldiers writhing in agony on the bayonets of the heroic Korean People's Army (KPA). There was the White House itself, exploding into smithereens beneath the blasts of North Korean nuclear missiles.

Propaganda posters, in their unmistakably bold primary colours, are still visible on every big street, but the heroes these days are not helmeted soldiers, but farmers, workers, and business types.

Even the propaganda posters have been given a makeover and show office workers
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

The last time I was here, the typical poster was all about smiting the imperialist forces. Today, the slogan I see most often reads: "Let's safeguard the party by implementing the five-year strategy for economic development." The figure in the picture, mouth open in a shout of exhortation, is not a sailor or infantryman, but a helmeted factory worker. Other posters show a besuited figure with a smart red tie. Something extraordinary is happening in North Korea, and it has happened with great speed. A year ago, as President Trump threatened "fire and fury" and Kim

Jong-un promised nuclear retaliation, the peninsula appeared to be as close to war as at any time in the past 65 years. But after the summit between the two leaders in Singapore in June, and three meetings between Mr Kim and the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, the atmosphere has been transformed.
It is obvious even at Panmunjom, the border village where North Korean soldiers face their South Korean and US enemies across an open border, famously described by Bill Clinton as “the scariest place on earth”.

“You visit in a significant period, when there is historical momentum for a durable peace,” says Lieutenant-Colonel Hwang Myong-jin, the KPA officer who escorts us around the site. “Thanks to the wisdom of our Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong-un, this place of conflict is turning into a symbol of peace.”

As striking as the new attitude to the old enemy are the visible changes in the texture of daily life. This was my seventh trip to North Korea in 22 years, but my first since Mr Kim succeeded his late father, Kim Jong-il, in 2011. During a week-long trip to Pyongyang, and the cities of Wonsan and Kaesong, I found myself constantly surprised by small innovations and tokens of modernisation.

Despite the changes, monuments to the Korean Workers' Party are a reminder that North Korea is still avowedly communist TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

Individually, they are superficial; in any other country, they would hardly be worthy of note. But collectively, they suggest that Mr Kim is taking the country in a direction that would have been unimaginable seven years ago.

It begins at Pyongyang's Sunan Airport, where I arrive at the gleaming new terminal building. My books are scrutinised and several are confiscated, including an academic study of North Korea and a harmless guide book. But in arrivals, I find something common to international airports, but formerly unknown here — a window where (for a steep €200, plus €80 of pre-paid credit) I buy a smartphone SIM card that allows internet access.

Smartphones, manufactured in China, are seen everywhere although for North Koreans they are restricted to a closed and carefully policed intranet, and blocked from accessing the world wide web. Nonetheless, it is astonishing to ride the Pyongyang Metro, with its 1950s trains purchased second-hand from East

Germany, and see commuters doing what commuters do all over the world: playing poker and Candy Crush on their phones.

North Koreans often claim proudly to be the custodians of a “pure” form of the Korean language, uninfected, as South Korean is, by foreign loan words. But a foreign friend working in Pyongyang told me that English terms are creeping in, including “jam”, meaning a traffic jam, and “inflate” in reference to rising prices.

Pyongyang commuters, like those in many other cities, can now play games such as Candy Crush on their smartphones. The transport fleet isn’t quite so modern, though, with 1950s underground trains bought second hand from East Germany TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

Above ground the look of the city has been transformed. Our ever-present guides proudly point out the “construction” boom which began in the city in the early years of Mr Kim. There are more cars than ever — not only ancient Volvos and black limousines of the nomenklatura, but an assortment of Mercedes, Toyotas and Chinese brands.

Taxis, bearing the word illuminated in English, rumble by. Bicycles have been supplemented by battery-powered electric cycles, which cost a few hundred pounds each. There is even a fleet of Boris-style public bikes, which can be reserved online and paid for with the Narae card, a prepaid card that is charged up and which can be used in shops and restaurants.

These, too, have proliferated in ways that would have been unthinkable until recently. The large streets all have kiosks every few hundred yards, selling snacks, drinks, cigarettes or cut flowers. On my first visit to Pyongyang, the "Number One Department" was a sepulchral, almost deserted place which gave the impression of being constructed merely to show to foreign tourists. This month, I visited a lively four-storey supermarket with plenty of shoppers, selling clothes, household goods and food (including ostrich eggs for $5 each).

In the old days, a meal out in Pyongyang consisted of good Korean food, washed down with soju spirit (a drink which, in North Korea, is sometimes made out of acorns). Entertainment was provided by the waitresses, who danced demurely as they sang ditties like *The Song of Industrial Rehabilitation for Nation Building* and *Please Come Back Soon After Your Convoy Duty.*
Today, one can eat sushi, pizza, fried chicken and burgers, and steaks that cost as much as $70 a cut. These restaurants are listed on Mamulsang, an online retail site where you can use your Narae card to buy clothes (a dress for the equivalent of $188), computers and CD-ROMs.

These are not just for the tourists. Everywhere we went we saw neatly dressed Pyongyangites who looked suspiciously like an emergent middle class in the last communist dictatorship on earth.

"This is the era of information technology and things are very different from the past," said Kim Chol-ung, a university student, at the Kaeson Youth Park, a funfair

where boys in tight T-shirts and girls in jeans, trench coats and heels lingered at 10pm on weeknights.

“We can do many things with the help of technology. Our life is better than that of our parents. It is because of our Great Leader the Respected Comrade Marshal Kim Jong-un that we are leading a happy life.”

A jogger in the North Korean capital, where the texture of daily of life is much changed
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

It is important not to be naive about all this. Mr Kim’s North Korea is still the most repressive country in the world, and its worst aspects remain unchanged. Far beyond the view of people like me on closely guided tours are brutal political prison camps, definitively described in a report by a United Nations commission in 2014.

Even the small new freedoms point up the general atmosphere of oppression. For example, internet use is strictly controlled. At Kim Il-sung University, the Oxbridge of North Korea, only 70 out of 1,000 computers are connected to the World Wide Web, and access to these is limited and monitored.

Even the suspension of anti-US propaganda is strictly conditional, and the KPA remains one of the biggest and most ideologically motivated fighting forces on earth. As Colonel Hwang said, after his speech about symbolic peace: “If the US touches a single blade of grass or a stone under the sovereignty of our country, then we will immediately respond with nuclear bombs.”

All of the changes that have taken place could be reversed. But they demonstrate two important things. One is that the era of famine, which killed hundreds of thousands of people in the late 1990s, and even affected the showcase city of Pyongyang, is completely past.

The second is something about the character of Mr Kim, a man prepared to look at things anew and to permit changes that once would have seemed inconceivable. Hamburgers and funfairs do not amount to political reform and denuclearisation. But perhaps in years to come, they will be recognised as the first faint signs of change.

The Times, October 1, 2018

Kim Jong-un switches North Korea to capitalism

Competition is helping North Korea grow fast

Many workers in North Korea are motivated by posters and profits alike JACK HILL/THE TIMES

The Pyongyang catfish farm looks at first glance like a characteristically grim example of communist central planning.

It stands beside a smoking power station in a grey corner of the North Korean capital, decorated by the obligatory mosaic of the late Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il. But it is a remarkable place, an example of something that formerly would have been unthinkable: free-market, capitalist reform in the world's most uncompromisingly hardline communist state.

The clue is in the dull-looking chart on a nearby board: rather than tabulating the output of the factory, it tracks the performance of its individual work teams. For

decades, North Korean farmers, factory workers and bureaucrats surrendered everything they produced to the government, to be rewarded with fixed rations under the state distribution system. At the Pyongyang fish farm, however, and other state-owned enterprises across the country, they are paid for what they do and no more.

The farm produces 2,500 tonnes of fish a year. Beyond 2,000 tonnes, it can keep the surplus — 500 tonnes of catfish, worth about £350,000 — and do with it what it pleases.

“We can sell the fish and reinvest it in equipment and new kinds of feed for the fish,” Ju Gao-ram, the technical manager, said. “We can direct it to bonuses for the workers. Wages are not the same every month. There is competition between each work group and the winners get financial bonuses.”

Until recently it was an article of faith in North Korea that unlike the dog-eat-dog societies of the decadent capitalist world, its citizens were motivated by patriotic love of their leaders rather than individual gain. Now, in places like this, they find themselves competing for the biggest share of the pie — and the authorities speak openly of it.

“We will introduce elements of capitalism,” said Kim Jong-hun of the Korean National Peace Committee, which hosted this trip to the North for a small group of journalists. “If there are advantages, why not?”

There is a wider range of goods, including mobile phones, to buy JACK HILL/THE TIMES

Could the changes now under way be the first stirrings of the kind of reform that Deng Xiaoping unleashed in China in the 1980s? North Koreans strenuously deny this. They insist that rules allowing for competitive mechanisms were laid down decades ago by Kim Il-sung, the founding North Korean leader. While this may be technically true, they were not put into practice until after the deadly famine that struck in the late 1990s, when the state distribution system broke down.

Simply as a matter of survival, people began to trade what they had in private markets; and the authorities, with nothing to offer of their own, turned a blind eye. After the disaster had passed, control of market activity was intermittently tightened and relaxed but it was not until the succession of Kim Jong-un in 2011 that the state made its peace with market forces.

The economic changes are unlikely to be matched by political liberalization JACK HILL/THE TIMES

“It is necessary to launch a general revolutionary offensive and make a dynamic advance in the economic construction,” Mr Kim told the Workers’ Party of Korea in April.

Son Hyun-sol, an economist at North Korea’s Academy of Social Science, said: “China is building Chinese-style special socialism. Korea is building socialism with Korean characteristics.” The effect of these changes is difficult to judge because of North Korea’s failure to publish reliable economic statistics and because of the international sanctions on Mr Kim’s regime. But Peter Ward, a British scholar specialising in North Korea, believes that it is significant.

“He [Mr Kim] has brought about significant economic growth at a speed North Korea has not seen since the 1970s,” he said. “Sanctions have been completely cancelled out by the growth of the market. This is the best time in their lives for most Koreans.” Others believe that the boost in the economy is the result of

“disguised aid” from China in the form of cheap electricity and subsidised sales of oil.

Sadly, the economic changes show no sign of being accompanied by any hint of political liberalisation. “It’s totally prohibited to propagate ideas that could undermine our values and society,” Mr Son said. However competitive the environment at the Pyongyang catfish farm, the Dear Leader’s image will be looking down over it for a long time to come.

The Times, September 28, 2018

Easygoing minders now tell it like it is in North Korea – and that’s a first

Lieutenant-Colonel Hwang Myong-jin, guiding visitors around the demilitarised border zone at Panmunjom, says the North seeks a durable peace Times photographer Jack Hill

They can be friends or foes, angels or devils. They can open up a window on one of the most obscure countries on earth or obstruct the most modest attempts

to understand it. They work in teams, and one of them is usually called Mr Kim and the other Mr Ri. They are North Korean government guides, known as “minders”, an unavoidable part of any trip to the People’s Republic.

I have met a good number of them over the years, but I have never been so lucky in my minders as I was this time. Mr Kim and Mr Ri were the most charming, articulate and intelligent North Koreans I have met. They put the best possible face on an impossible duty: justifying their government to the outside world.

It’s not easy getting into North Korea if you are a journalist. Since my sixth visit in 2010 I had been trying in vain to get a visa through the country’s London embassy. Then I applied to join a trip organised by Paul Tjia, a Dutch business consultant who advises companies on investing in North Korea. To my surprise, Jack Hill, the *Times* photographer, and I had our visas approved.

For the first time, official minders are willing to admit to the “simple life” led by North Koreans
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

On past trips it was a naughty game to see how far the guides would go in asserting the official version that North Korea is a paradise, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This time Mr Kim and Mr Ri felt no need to indulge in such absurdity.

One of the most striking things about them was their willingness to acknowledge imperfection. When fellow North Koreans were rude or unhelpful, Mr Ri

commented on it indignantly. Another time, he said: “Of course we don’t lead a luxurious life, but people are proud to have a simple life through their own efforts.” Anywhere else in the world, this would not be worth noticing, but in North Korea it counts as bracing honesty.

Both spoke fluent idiomatic English. Both were men of great humour. Mr Ri beguiled the five-hour drive from Wonsan to Pyongyang with a series of filthy North Korean jokes (“Have you heard the one about the elephant and the ant on their wedding night?”) But I have little doubt that their faith in the rightness and goodness of their government was unfeigned.

I got one telling off, for “disrespecting” a statue of the founding “eternal president”, the late Kim Il-sung, by approaching it from the side rather than face-on. They smiled uncomfortably when we asked about matters which they had never been officially told about. “That information is not available here,” said Mr Kim, when I raised the question of Kim Jong-un’s education in Switzerland. “It doesn’t matter anyway,” he added. “Korean people totally trust our leader and totally defend him.”

Were we just lucky in our guides? It is difficult to know, but I suspect that there was more to it, and that their relaxedness was a byproduct of a new confidence in dealing with the outside world that comes from the top. On the last night we celebrated with a karaoke session in the hotel. Mr Ri’s choice was Barbie Girl by Aqua. “Life in plastic, it’s fantastic,” he sang in a fine baritone. “Imagination, life is your creation.”

The eternal president couldn’t have put it better himself.

About press missions to North Korea

Above articles were written by Richard Lloyd Parry from The Times, who joined a press mission to North Korea in 2018. This mission was initiated by GPI Consultancy, a specialized Dutch consultancy firm in the field of offshore sourcing. We arrange press and study tours to various countries, including North Korea. Please contact us in case you are interested to participate.

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