A YEAR IN PYONGYANG
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by Andrew Holloway
Andrew Holloway lived for a year in Pyongyang, and it was all my fault. He wrote a book about it, but it never got published till now. This is my walk-on part in his tale.

It all goes back to 1986, when I at last got into North Korea for the first time. Among many memorable encounters, one was with what I’d once – as a veteran of Ian Smith’s Rhodesia: they expelled me, but that’s another story – have called a Rhodie. A middle-aged white Zimbabwean, complete with Kim Il Sung badge (meaning he worked there), propping up a Pyongyang bar – with a look that said he’d far rather be somewhere else.

His name was David Richardson, and he worked as a reviser for the Foreign Languages Publishing House. If you ever wondered how the works of the Great Leader and other North Korean propaganda at least end up in decent English (or French, German, etc), it’s thanks to people like David. The job is sometimes called polishing. First, armies of locals toil to translate the Leader’s obiter dicta into what they fondly imagine is English. But then they need a native speaker to check that it’s right. So at any given time the FLPH usually has half a dozen assorted foreigners doing this job for the major languages.

Good for them. In this area North Korean standards are higher than in the South, where all too often bad English spoils the show: as recently in signs for the ‘Worldcup’ [sic]. A rare northern bloopener was when a hagiography of U No Hu was published in Arabic as ‘Kim Il Sung Is God’: not calculated to impress devout Muslims. In English it came out as ‘Kim Il Sung: A Divine Man’: not so much blasphemy as high camp.

Needless to say this is not exciting work; nor was Pyongyang in 1987–1988 an exciting place. David had done two years, and was ready to leave – but it seemed they wouldn’t let him go without a replacement. I pledged to do my best, returned to England with a batch of application forms, sent a notice round Leeds University, and called a meeting. A dozen people turned up, mostly students soon to graduate. I warned
them of the rigours of life in Pyongyang – and its risks. (Ali Lameda, a Venezuelan communist who was a reviser in the 1960s, unwisely told the North Koreans how dire their propaganda was. He got six years’ solitary confinement until Nicolae Ceaușescu, no less, secured his release.)

I hope I repeated these warnings to the odd straggler who missed the meeting but came to see me afterwards. One was fortyish, not a student but a social worker. I remember wondering what would prompt him to contemplate such an unusual change of direction. Evidently serious, he borrowed some materials from Leeds University Korea Project’s small library. And that was it. As far as I recall, we only met just that once.

Being but the postman, I didn’t systematically follow up on what I’d set in chain. But I heard on the grapevine that several people did apply for the job. Some got replies, and more than one was messed around as regards on/off offers, date changes, etc: all par for the course. In 1990 I was in Pyongyang again and met two young British revisers; one of whom, Michael Harrold, was a Leeds graduate who’d come to my meeting. Michael eventually stayed six years, which must be a record. He mentioned others who’d been and gone – it happens, especially there – but I didn’t take in the names and details.

Fast forward five more years, to a spring day in 1995 when I suddenly caught up with an awful lot all at once. A package came in the university internal mail, from someone in physics that I didn’t know, Hugh Hubbard. It was a book-length manuscript by one Andrew Holloway, describing his year in Pyongyang during 1987–1988. He’d written it soon after his return, but for whatever reason had taken it no further. And now never would, for in January he’d died of stomach cancer. He wanted me to have a copy.

Like I said, a terrible lot to take in all at once. It still feels weird to think I was partly responsible for a whole year in the life of someone I barely knew, and now never will. And too sad: having read his book, there was so much I’d love to have asked him. How I wish he’d got in touch. But he of course had other things on his mind; like cancer. Since then, I’ve done all too little with Andrew’s book. I’ve shown it to people with an interest in North Korea; copies have been taken here, in America,
and in (South) Korea. But I wasn’t sure if it would attract a commercial publisher; nor did I ever find the time for the editing work that the manuscript would require if it were to come out as a book. It stayed in my files, and intermittently on my conscience.

But then they invented the Internet, and a whole new way of making things known. I’d vaguely thought about having a website, but it was the idea of at last giving Andrew’s work the circulation it deserved that spurred me on. Seeking family permission led me to his son Ross – who turned out to be a web designer. Some things are meant to be. Some years later a volunteer typeset the manuscript and made it available through a print-on-demand service.

Ideally the book still wants editing, and at some point will be. But after all this time I just wanted it out there without further delay. Besides, the odd mistake hardly detracts from a unique document. Memoirs of living in Pyongyang are rare enough, and I know none like this. Andrew brings a fresh perspective to an area beset by cliché. A socialist of the old school, he went to North Korea without the usual prejudice. Yet as an honest observer, he tells what he sees – and as Yorkshiremen do, calls a spade a bloody shovel.

This was not the best year of his life. Frank about the frustrations, he still tries to view North Korea on its own terms: to see the mad sense it all makes. He knows the people are not the government, and he brings them to life. There are unforgettable vignettes, but also thoughtful reflection and a dry humour. Andrew is unsparing of himself too, even if (as his son hints) there were a few personal adventures which he chose to omit.

That was in the 1980s, but this is by no means just a period piece. Today’s revisers lead a less lonely life, thanks to the famine which since 1995 has added a hundred or so aid workers to Pyongyang’s expatriate community. There are even weekly discos, a delight unimaginable in Andrew’s day. But has North Korea itself changed? Not in essence, I reckon; not really, not yet. Thus an account written over a decade ago can still give the authentic feel of this deeply peculiar place, and what makes it tick. And not a few of Andrew’s comments are prescient of the disastrous decline that was yet to come.
But judge for yourself. I don’t know if Andrew Holloway would have thanked me for his year in Pyongyang, but I can only thank him for what he made of it. In leaving us such an unusual and insightful account, he’s done both North Korea and himself proud. I hope he knew that; I wish I’d known him; and I wish he were still here to see his work up on the Web and in print for all to read. Except in Pyongyang, needless to say. But that’ll come.

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, December 2002
CHAPTER ONE

There are times in life when even the dullest and most complacent among us feel the need to make a change. It was at such a time in my life that a friend drew my attention to a job she had seen advertised on a Leeds University notice board. It was an unusual job in a little-known country. The remuneration was not extravagant, but I estimated it would be sufficient for me to meet my ongoing commitments and save enough to tide me over on my return until I could find another job.

The country was the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, better known in the west as North Korea. The job entailed revising translations into English that Koreans had made of the works of their President, Kim Il Sung, his son and heir apparent Kim Jong Il, and sundry other propaganda.

A certain amount of kudos seemed to attach to this job. The advert stated that the successful applicant would be the first Briton to reside in this country since before the Second World War. The application forms were being issued by a Leeds University lecturer named Aidan Foster-Carter. North Korea was his special field of study. He had recently made a visit to the country when he had been asked to try and recruit a new English Language Reviser. Before submitting my application I took the opportunity of asking him what I could expect to find there. What he had to say was mostly reassuring.

Halfway through September I received a letter from Pyongyang. It was from David Richardson, a Zimbabwean and the present incumbent of the post. He informed me that I was likely to be offered the job. He had been doing it for two years. He said that there were disadvantages to living in Pyongyang, particularly ‘this business of the mail’, but on the whole the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. A fortnight later he rang me at work to confirm my appointment. He added that a formal offer would arrive in the post shortly. I experienced a mixture of consternation and excitement. It looked as if for the first and probably only time in my life, I was about to do something different. I quelled my apprehensions.
by telling myself that no matter what sort of an experience it was, at least it would be an adventure. Some adventure. Being marooned on a desert island is undoubtedly a sort of adventure, as is doing time in gaol for an offence one has not committed. But looked at from the right perspective, getting up each day, going to work and pursuing one’s banal, petty bourgeois, provincial pleasures are also a form of adventure, and a lot more fun as well.

At the time I applied, all I knew about North Korea was that it was a communist state situated on a peninsula in North-East Asia bordered on the north by China and the Soviet Union and opposite the islands of Japan; that it had a reputation for being bizarre and isolationist, an Asian equivalent to Albania; that there had been a war on the Korean peninsula in the early fifties in which United Nations troops, predominantly American but including contingents from Britain and a number of other countries, had participated against the north; that the war had ended in a stalemate with Korea partitioned into two countries, a capitalist south and a communist north; and most vividly I recalled that the North Korea football team had pulled off some notable surprises in the 1966 World Cup Finals. When I received David Richardson’s letter I thought I had better expand my knowledge. I went down to Leeds City Library but I could find virtually no material on Korea at all, or at least not on North Korea. I contacted Aidan Foster-Carter, who lent me a couple of books and several articles. This is the gist of what I read.

Korea, it seems, has always been weird. The Koreans are an ancient people, established on their peninsula since time immemorial. For many centuries they maintained their distinct national identity, culture and independence, periodically repelling invasions from China and the Japanese samurai across the water. Independent and inward looking to the point of xenophobia, Korea was traditionally known as the hermit kingdom. As can happen to inward looking societies, for example North Korea today, the hermit kingdom began to fall behind the rest of the world in social and economic development. In the late nineteenth century it was feudal, corrupt, backward, and an easy prey for the Japanese who had long established informal domination over the peninsula before formally
annexing it as a colony in 1910. It remained a Japanese colony until the end of the Second World War. When Japan fell in 1945, the Americans came in from the south while the Soviet troops descended from the north. They bumped into each other at the thirty-eighth parallel, about two thirds of the way up towards the northern border. The country of Korea was now partitioned just as Germany had been a few months earlier.

The Americans and the Russians set about installing native governments in their respective spheres of influence. They each aspired to set up the type of native government that would retain its territory within their sphere of influence after they had physically withdrawn. Among the Soviet forces was a Red Army major, a Korean who used to be called something different but had changed his name to Kim Il Sung, literally Kim the Sun, to make himself sound more impressive. He enjoyed a degree of popularity in Korea, particularly in the north. He had previously conducted a brave if ineffectual guerrilla resistance against the Japanese in the northern border areas and in south Manchuria. He was young, only thirty-three in 1945, charismatic, and a good orator. He already had his own little bit of communist political machinery in place from the resistance days. The Russians had little difficulty in installing him in power.

It was not proving so easy for the Americans down in the south to find a comparable political figure who could be relied upon to adhere to the ideals and policies to which they thought a good Korean should adhere and who could command sufficient popular support to maintain stable government. Reunification of Korea was out of the question. To the Americans it would have meant delivering the whole peninsula on a plate to the evil forces of communism. Kim the Sun was popular throughout Korea as a resistance hero and he had enough organisation to impose his will on the dissenters. As it was, even with all the resources of their military government, the American authorities had more than enough trouble rigging elections to give a veneer of democratic legitimacy to the puppet dictatorship on the man of their choice, Syngman Rhee.

In 1950, Kim the Sun decided that the time was ripe to reunify the nation. The Korean War started on June 25th, 1950. Three days later the
North’s forces entered Seoul, the capital of the South and formerly of the whole country. Syngman Rhee was not terribly popular. His troops did not fight enthusiastically. Within a few weeks the North’s forces had nearly taken over the whole country. The Americans manipulated the United Nations into authorising a UN expeditionary force to drive the communists back.

Troops from sixteen nations took part in the invasion of Korea under the ægis of the UN, but by far the bulk of the men and armour were supplied by the USA. Confronted by better trained and infinitely better equipped forces, the men of the Korean People’s Army were driven back north as quickly as they had initially come south. They were driven all the way back to the Amnok River on the Chinese border. There they were reinforced by a small detachment of a million Chinese. Now it was the turn of the UN forces to retreat.

The fighting came to an end three years later. An armistice was signed. Territorially everyone was more or less where they were when they started. The country remained divided roughly along the thirty-eighth parallel. Demographically, the population of the North had been reduced from eleven million to nine million. The countryside of the North had been ravaged and napalmed. Its towns and cities had been bombed to rubble. In 1950 the population of Pyongyang was estimated to be around 200,000. According to the Americans’ official statistics, they dropped approximately a quarter of a million bombs on it. The North Koreans predictably contend that this is a gross underestimate but one and a quarter bombs per person sounds like pretty serious warfare by anyone’s standards.

It came as a considerable shock to me to discover the extent of the destruction that had been inflicted on the north of Korea. I always considered myself a reasonably well-informed sort of person but I had no idea, and I doubt that was atypical in this, that the carnage in Korea had been on a scale comparable to Vietnam. Shortly after my arrival in Pyongyang, a British film crew came over to make a television series about the war and so perhaps people are now better informed. I hope so because the Korean War should take its rightful place alongside the war
in Vietnam as a permanent symbol and reminder of the hideous excesses of post-war US foreign policy and the dangers of irresponsible militarism. Also it is impossible to understand why North Korea has developed as it has over the past thirty-five years without a true appreciation of the holocaust that swept the country between 1950 and 1953. And the developments in North Korea and the Korean peninsula generally ought to be better understood, because the thirty-eighth parallel is one of the world’s most sensitive potential trigger points for global disaster.

Of course it could be argued that the North Koreans were lucky to have got off so lightly. If MacArthur had had his way and not been recalled by Eisenhower, he would have dropped the atom bomb on them and their Chinese allies.

Incredibly, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea did emerge phœnix-like from the ashes of war with Kim Il Sung still in power. In the twenty years after the war it achieved what was by all accounts a miraculous economic recovery. The towns and cities were rebuilt. The countryside was revived. Industries were restored and expanded. The transport network was repaired. By the early seventies the DPRK had a very healthy economy by the standards of developing countries. It had achieved remarkable success, not only in terms of living standards but in creating an economy that was independent and to an extent immunised against the effects of first world recessions, unlike many developing countries, including quite prosperous ones, whose economies still depended on a few primary commodities to pay for imported goods, and whose industries were substantially owned by first world capital. The DPRK chose to minimise oil imports by exploiting its natural coal and water resources to generate power. It made its own cement. It made its own steel to make its own trains, trucks, and tractors. In spite of the fact that its terrain is predominantly mountainous and arable land scarce, it became virtually self-sufficient in food. It even managed to clothe its own population by inventing an anthracite-based synthetic fibre called vindon.

The reason this economic recovery has been described as miraculous is that it was accomplished from scratch with limited foreign aid and
And there was andrew hollaway

As well as being decimated by the war, the country had been subject for thirty-five of the previous forty years to Japanese colonial rule. Although there had been development during this period in line with Japanese interests, the bulk of the administration and technical expertise had been supplied by Japanese personnel. At the time of liberation in 1945, there was not a single institution of higher education in the north of Korea. So in 1953 there was a chronic shortage of professional and technical expertise to go with a ravaged countryside and a bombed-out industrial base.

Financial and technical assistance was forthcoming from the Chinese and the Soviets. There is no way that the North Koreans could have managed without it. However, the scale of assistance was limited due to Kim Il Sung’s obstinate refusal to accept political conditions in return for aid. There were even times when his independent attitude led to a withdrawal of aid. From the outset of liberation from the Japanese, Kim Il Sung was determined that his country was going to be fully independent and not a Soviet satellite like the Warsaw Pact countries, nor for that matter a client state of China either.

Another factor that must be taken into account in assessing the DPRK’s achievement is that ever since the war it has felt it necessary to invest an extremely high proportion of its budget in military expenditure. If the Americans and the South Korean authorities are sincere in their expressed anxiety about possible aggression from the North, then the North is equally apprehensive about them. Technically the war is still in progress. No peace agreement has ever been signed, only an armistice.

I learned that the North Koreans had shown considerable ingenuity in accomplishing their economic miracle in the face of such daunting odds. I read how their scientists would, for example, take an imported tractor to pieces and reassemble it, identifying each part and working out how the parts linked together, until they were able to manufacture a tractor by themselves and to progress from there to the mass production of tractors and a fully-fledged indigenous tractor industry.

The other ingredients for the economic miracle were organisation, discipline, frugal living and hard toil, which were guaranteed not by
terror but by outstanding totalitarian organisation and ideological mo-
tivation supplied by the Workers’ Party of Korea, under the apparently
highly autocratic leadership of Kim Il Sung. It was known that there
were purges of opposition factions, particularly in the fifties, but unlikely
that they were carried out on a large scale, being confined to prominent
public figures and not involving sections of the general public. Even
in recent times it has not been unknown for recalcitrant ministers to
be reported seriously injured or killed in road traffic accidents, which
is odd because the DPRK has an extremely low volume of road traffic
and, moreover, most of the roads in and around the capital tend to be
very wide, having been planned in anticipation of an age of glorious
prosperity that was expected to follow the rapid industrialisation of the
fifties and sixties. I read that Kim Il Sung had secured his authority by
gaining the unquestioning loyalty of the masses through a personality
cult that exceeded those of Mao or Stalin, that he was always referred to
as the Great Leader, and that he was about to establish the world’s first
communist dynasty by preparing for his son, Kim Jong Il, known as the
Dear Leader, to succeed him.

I also read that since the great leap forward of the early post-war years,
the rate of economic growth in the DPRK had slumped dramatically.
If the economy was not totally stagnant it was lagging far behind the
leading developing countries, which include South Korea. Although the
DPRK had succeeded in building an independent national economy on
its own heavy industrial base, further development was impeded by an
acute shortage of hard currency. North Korea was able to supply its own
population with all the basic necessities without relying on imports, but
it was not producing quality goods to compete in the export market.
Without adequate income from exports, it lacked the hard currency to
import consumer luxuries and, more important, to buy access to the
sophisticated new technology that has in recent years revolutionised
industrial processes in the rest of the world, and without which their
industry must become increasingly obsolete and their exports even less
competitive. The country cut itself off from the normal channels of
international monetary assistance by adopting a policy in the seventies
of refusing to pay debts in time of difficulty instead of requesting reschedules. I gathered that the dilemma facing North Korea in the late nineteen eighties was how to gain access to the new technology to improve its economic performance without compromising its economic or political independence, and that the dilemma was all the more acute because the other Korea’s economy, developed with American and Japanese capital, is booming.

Armed with such sketchy information, when I eventually arrived in Pyongyang, I found myself immeasurably better informed that the average North Korean citizen, who has been conditioned to believe that the Japanese capitulation in World War Two was precipitated not by what happened at Hiroshima but by the unstoppable advance of the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army under its brilliant, iron-willed, ever-victorious commander, General Kim Il Sung, sun of the nation and lodestar of liberation, and that in 1950 they were not driven headlong to the northern border by the UN forces. They were merely making a temporary strategic retreat as a result of which they quickly recovered the lost ground again, thanks to the outstanding military genius of the aforesaid commander. Certainly a number of Chinese volunteers did cross the border to lend comradely assistance, but this figure of one million must clearly be dismissed as US imperialist propaganda designed to cover up the ignominy of the mighty imperialist military machine being unequal to the confrontation with the valiant Korean people under the inspired leadership of Great General Comrade Kim Il Sung. As for South Korea today, everyone knows about the distressed living conditions of the working masses who long for the Great Leader’s fatherly embrace, but are brutally suppressed by the US imperialists and the military fascist puppet dictatorship.

While I was reading up on North Korea and deciding that I would defer my appointment until after Christmas, I was in daily expectation of some official written communication regarding terms of contract, visas, and transport arrangements. Days turned into weeks and nothing happened. I began to think that I would never hear from North Korea again. Then one day came a phone call at work. ‘When are you coming to my country?’ asked a funny little voice. ‘Why do you not come?’ I explained that I
did not have wings and if they wanted me to fly to their country, they had better send me an airline ticket and a visa. This was the start of a confusing and inconclusive conversation. There were two major barriers to communication. First of all, the person I was speaking to did not have a good command of English. The other barrier was that he was evidently incapable of understanding what my problem was. If he had ever heard of airline tickets, he had no idea that they might be quite expensive. He certainly did not know what a visa was. This was the first in a long series of ludicrous telephone calls I was to receive over the months to come.

I took the next initiative myself by writing to the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Pyongyang, my prospective employer, and explaining to them what arrangements they needed to make. I suggested that they make the arrangements through their embassy in Copenhagen. Among Western capitalist countries, North Korea only had diplomatic relations with the Scandinavian countries and with Austria. There are no formal links at all with Britain.

Shortly afterwards the little men from Pyongyang rang me again at work, while I was out. They left a message that it would not be possible to make arrangements through their Copenhagen embassy, but that I should contact their consulate in Paris. Typically it never occurred to them that it might be helpful to let me have the Paris address or telephone number. I rang International Directory Enquiries but they had no listing for a North Korean consulate in Paris. I contacted Aidan Foster-Carter again and through him obtained the address of their permanent mission to UNESCO in Paris. I duly sent off another letter to Paris. This initiated a series of frustrating phone calls in French, a language of which I have only the flimsiest command, a fact which must have been instantly obvious to whomever I was speaking to.

By the time they had the sense to put me in communication with someone from Paris who spoke English, almost five months had elapsed since my initial contact from David Richardson. The original motivation for applying for such a ridiculous job had diminished and I was having serious doubts about the wisdom of going to this strange, remote, possibly sinister little country, which seemed to be administered by
crazed and incompetent officials, in the unlikely event that they ever proved capable of arranging my passage. Consequently when the English speaker asked me if I would be willing to pay my own fare as far as Moscow on the understanding that I would be reimbursed on my arrival in Pyongyang, I told him that not only was this unacceptable but that too much time had now been wasted and I had no further interest in the post. He either failed to understand what I had said or for some obscure reason chose not to, and so the phone calls from Paris and Pyongyang continued. I played along with them, although I no longer entertained any serious intention of going, partly because they were a source of mild amusement, partly because against all common sense and better judgement I was still tempted by the prospect of doing something so extraordinarily unusual as going to work in North Korea. It was in this same spirit of keeping the game open and seeing what transpired that I filled in the visa application form which they finally sent me at the beginning of June.

A couple of weeks later a situation in my personal life altered my mood so that I was in a receptive frame of mind when I picked up the phone one day and heard on the other end of the line a sane English voice. The voice belonged to Keith Bennett, political editor of the *Asian Times*. He was ringing to say that the Koreans in Paris had authorised him to buy me an airline ticket to Pyongyang, and did I still want to go. They had asked Keith to undertake the task of buying my ticket because he knew how to go about obtaining cheap air fares and could thus save the nation a few hundred precious dollars. This sort of thing is absolutely typical of the way this country of over twenty million people is run. It turned out that as well as being an authority on bucket shops, Keith was also a person who had been four times to North Korea. His answers to my questions about the place were on the whole encouraging. Before I knew where I was, I had handed in my notice at work.

I left Heathrow on the 11:30am Aeroflot flight to Moscow on Sunday 23rd August, 1987. I picked up a connecting flight at Moscow and within twenty-four hours I was in Pyongyang. I arrived in Pyongyang in the early afternoon, Pyongyang time, on Monday 24th August. It was almost exactly a year to the day since I had submitted my application.
It is axiomatic that perceptions and judgements are influenced by mood and preconceptions. I once met a couple of British sociologists in Pyongyang’s Koryo Hotel who were over for a conference. That day they had been taken on a visit to a co-operative farm. They conceded that it had been a nice outing. The peasants had been friendly and appeared happy and prosperous. The farm was modern and mechanised. They remained stubbornly unimpressed. They made the comments: You wonder what the rest of the farms are like. These people only let you see what they want you to see.

There is no questioning the validity of their observations. It certainly would have been a model farm they were taken to see. No country makes a point of displaying anything but its more favourable facets to its foreign visitors, but very few are as keen to keep foreigners on as tight a leash, or are as wary about what they might see and hear, as North Korea. It is a natural consequence that many foreign visitors tend to imagine that the underlying realities are very much worse than they actually are.

The fact remains, however, that those visitors came to North Korea with unfavourable preconceptions and were inclined to perceive everything they saw and experienced in a negative light. I saw the same process at work in another British visitor some weeks later. This one, however, was obliged to stay for a couple of months and was exposed to quite a lot of the life of the country. He finished up with a more respectful attitude to it, although being a normal, sensible, hedonistic Western bourgeois, he vowed that it would take a million dollars for him to ever think of going back again.

For my part, I arrived in Pyongyang with a very positive attitude. I felt in need of a change in my life. I had never had an opportunity to live abroad before. I was looking forward to the experience of living in North Korea in terms of a personal challenge and an adventure, and I was keen to observe life in a socialist country. I had never been to one before. I have always inclined politically to the left. I was a member of the Labour
Party, albeit a totally inert one. For more than ten years I had been earning my living as a local authority social worker. For the last eight of these years this had been in the context of Mrs Thatcher’s savagely reactionary Tory government. Most of my work had involved me with the miseries and alienation of the people at the bottom of the capitalist heap, the lumpenproletariat, the social sub-class organically generated by the capitalist system to constitute a reserve labour pool and a stratum of poverty against which the labouring masses can measure themselves as affluent, even though their remuneration must always remain less than the value of their labour, while a privileged minority within the same society luxuriates on the profits the workers create. For most of my lifetime there had been a broad political consensus in my country that this innately unfair economic system should be persevered with because it was proving successful in generating prosperity and permitted a high degree of individual freedom; and besides, the process of drastic, fundamental change would incur more aggravation than it was worth. But it was the responsibility of government to mediate the excesses of the capitalist system by placing limits on exploitation, and redistributing the nation’s wealth through progressive taxation and the maintenance of what we call the welfare state. Under Thatcherism the policy has been to deliberately exacerbate the excesses of capitalism, to swell the ranks of the lumpenproletariat and reduce the living standards of this sub-class in order to depress wages, and to weaken the collective power of the working classes that has traditionally been expressed through the trade union movement, while eroding traditional notions about the responsibilities of privilege. I had not liked what I had seen of the results of this policy. Although by no means widely travelled, I had visited my share of the world’s countries as a tourist, including a few developing ones. I had caught glimpses of what life was like for the dispossessed in economies of scarcity as well as in economies of affluence. I had come to the conclusion that the first essential goal for any society must be the rational exploitation and equitable distribution of its material resources. I considered, and still do, that such values as freedom of speech and movement may be very important but are still of secondary importance.
I had read that in North Korea people had to have permits to travel even within the country. I was instinctively appalled by this, but I was aware that such a restriction would not have had much impact on the lives of quite a few people I had been visiting as a social worker. They had the right to go anywhere they pleased. They just did not have the money to exercise that right. All in all, my mood, values and preconceptions were going to incline me to be sympathetic in my perceptions of socialism in action in the third world.

It was hot and sticky the day I first set foot on North Korean tarmac. Summer temperatures in Pyongyang are no higher than England enjoys in a rare good year but humidity levels can verge on tropical. I was lucky it was not raining. The rain ignores Korea for the rest of the year but makes ample amends in the monsoon months of July and August.

Pyongyang’s international airport is tiny. There is not a lot of air traffic to the DPRK: two scheduled flights a week from Moscow and Beijing respectively, and one from Khabarossk. At the time of writing a new airport is under construction to be ready to receive an anticipated 20,000 participants in the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students due to be held in Pyongyang in July 1989, the first time the festival will have been staged in Asia, but a poor consolation prize in the prestige stakes in comparison to the Olympic Games.

There was nothing in the customs procedure to suggest I was about to be assimilated into a harsh, repressive, authoritarian regime. There was none of the three-minute glare you always get at passport control at Moscow Airport. The staff here seemed cheerful and relaxed. Nobody ransacked my luggage looking for seditious literature.

Mr Ming, the head of protocol from the publishing house, was at the airport with an interpreter to greet me. As we set off for my new home, I looked eagerly out of the car window. The picture that unfolded was of a bright, clean, attractive modern city. This was clearly not one of the world’s chronic disaster areas. There were no crumbling slums like the ones I had seen a few months earlier on the drive from the airport into Alexandria. This was a world removed from the sights that shock on the road from Palam into Delhi or from Dum Dum into Calcutta. The roads
were wide and lined with trees. There were interminable modern concrete
apartment blocks but the balconies had been faced with pastel coloured
tiles to make them more attractive, and it seemed that three-quarters of
the inhabitants had decided to make their environment more cheerful by
cultivating potted plants and flowers on their balconies. In the city centre
were imposing public buildings of bright granite surrounded by statuary
and fountains. Traffic was scarce but the people on the streets looked
clean and well turned out in smart, attractive, Western-style clothes.
Pyongyang in August did not present a grim scene of drab austerity,
faceless people uniformly dressed. It was not Asia, seething, colourful,
startling. It was mostly evocative of a nineteen fifties planner’s idea of a
model high rise council estate for the respectable working classes, except
that here the people seemed to be behaving as the planners intended. No
evidence of vandalism or graffiti in Pyongyang.

As I tried to familiarise myself with the image of Pyongyang, I in-
evitably found myself at the same time becoming very familiar with the
image of its sponsor. I first saw him as I stepped out of the plane. There is
a mural on the façade of the airport building depicting his countenance
as it was twenty years ago, looking rather sombre. I noticed that my two
hosts displayed the same image on badges pinned to their chests, and
then I noticed that all the rest of the population were wearing those
badges too. I saw an enormous bronze statue of him on top of a hill,
his right arm outstretched to indicate the path of the Korean revolution.
Where we in the West would expect to see hoardings advertising cars and
cigarettes and all the other consumer products we need to make us happy,
in Pyongyang one sees posters and murals, but there is only one product
on offer. There he is, always a head higher than everyone around him,
receiving floral tributes from his adoring subjects, or on an inspection
tour of a factory or, in homely vein, standing in a grocer’s shop examining
a large, exquisitely oval egg while the shop assistants and customers look
up with misty eyes at the great father leader. And when we arrive at my
new home, my little suite of rooms at the Ansan Chodasso, the Ansan
Guest House, there he is on the wall of my study-bedroom watching over
my rest and labours as he does for all his subjects with his customary
warm solicitude, and there he is again in my living room. Considerations of modesty presumably inhibit him from intruding into my bathroom.

My arrival had been so long delayed that I had lost the distinction of being the first Briton in half a century to live in North Korea. Michael, a young graduate from Leeds University, had already been in residence at the Ansan Chodasso since March. He had heard about the job in the same way and at the same time as I had, but for some reason the Koreans had shown more efficiency in arranging his passage than they had mine.

I spent my first afternoon in Korea sleeping off the effects of jet-lag. I forced myself to get up again for dinner and afterwards Michael and I set out for our local, the nearby Potanggang Hotel, to celebrate my arrival. When we stepped out of the Ansan Chodasso that first evening, I was momentarily disorientated by the darkness. Our street, like most streets in Pyongyang, was equipped with street lights. However, for reasons of economy, they hardly ever switch them on. No sooner had my eyes become accustomed to the unfamiliar lack of light than I found myself stumbling in Michael’s footsteps across a dusty construction site. Throughout my time in Pyongyang a major road bridge was under construction across a loop in the Potang River. The beginning of the bridge lay between our guest house and the Potanggang Hotel. They never cordoned off the construction site and there was always a path somewhere for pedestrians to get across it, but the route changed as the work advanced, sometimes from day to day. For the last few months of my stay the route led under the structure of the bridge. This was the first of many occasions that I was to pick my way, often in pitch darkness, sometimes blind drunk, across that construction site. Sometimes I fell over but I always made it. That night the Potanggang Hotel became my first stage on what was over the months to come to prove an increasingly sad little social circuit.

Ψ

I was excused labour for the first two days after my arrival and taken to see the sights of the city. It was not an exacting schedule, a couple of hours in the morning, a couple in the afternoon. The first morning there was
the inevitable visit to the President’s fabled birthplace of Mangyondae. Luckily I had read about this previously and, being prepared in advance, I was able to maintain a polite exterior and keep my amusement to myself.

Mangyondae is situated a couple of miles outside Pyongyang on the banks of the Taedong River. It is said to be the place where the Great Leader was born into a humble peasant family and where he grew up until he left home at the age of thirteen to join up with the anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters in Manchuria. It should be noted that although his family were humble peasants, they were at the same time great patriots, thinkers and revolutionaries. Kim Il Sung’s father, Kim Hyong Jik, is supposed to have been an influential leader of the national liberation movement against the Japanese occupation. It was none other than the Great Leader’s great-grandfather, Kim Ung U, who led the successful assault on the predatory US battleship, the General Sherman, that infiltrated Korea up the Taedong River in 1866. We in the West do tend to forget just how far back US imperialist designs on the Korean peninsula actually go.

As any North Korean will tell you, you can’t beat an outing to historic Mangyondae for a fun-packed day out for all the family. Set in several acres of lovely parkland, it offers first and foremost the original medieval thatched cottage where President Kim Il Sung spent his formative years. Why is it the only house left in the village? How did it escape the American bombing? Why does it look so much like a recently built model of an old-style Korean dwelling? It’s a miracle. Miracles sit easily with some people. Think of Jesus. Presumably no such questions invade the minds of the hundreds and thousands of Koreans who are privileged to have the opportunity of paying homage at this shrine every year and gaze on the original farm implements and household utensils this humble but exceedingly worthy family used in the early years of this century. When they have had their fill of worshipping, they can ascend the hill and enjoy a very pleasant view of the river and of wooded hills. North Korea is an extremely picturesque country of lakes, rivers, trees and small mountains. The locals are extremely proud of their scenery. They also like to impose order and domesticity on it. The hill at Mangyondae is typical. There is a
road up to the top. An attractive open pavilion in traditional style has been built on the summit and, as in nearly all scenic spots in the DPRK, concrete tables and benches have been neatly laid out for the comfort and convenience of the working people so that they can have a picnic. The working people take grateful advantage of these facilities and can be relied upon to clear away every scrap of refuse and detritus when they leave. The North Koreans have to be the cleanest and most orderly people in the world. It is impossible for me to judge, without having visited South Korea or having much knowledge of traditional Korean culture, to what extent this trait is a legacy of their cultural heritage and to what extent it has been drilled into them by the system. I suspect the latter because the need for cleanliness, tidiness and hygiene is an obsessive theme in the President’s speeches in the early years.

When the visitors have satisfied their spiritual requirements by worshipping at the shrine and their aesthetic and gustatory requirements by picnicking among the natural splendours on the hill, they can round off a perfect day by spending the afternoon at North Korea’s premier funfair, situated less than a mile from the shrine but discreetly out of view of it. All the rides have been imported from Japan. The star ride is a terrifying roller coaster with a double three-hundred-and-sixty-degree loop against which the hideous Corkscrew at Alton Towers in Derbyshire pales into insignificance. For a dreadful moment I thought I was going to be press-ganged into taking a ride on it, but on this occasion I was spared.

In the afternoon I was taken to view Pyongyang’s most notable monuments, the Arch of Triumph and the Tower of the Juche Idea. The Arch of Triumph turned out to be a virtual facsimile of the one in Paris, only Pyongyang’s version is said to be slightly higher than the original and is inscribed with the dates 1925 and 1945 on either side of the arch. 1925 is the year when in the legend the Great Leader left home and family for Manchuria to join the struggle against the Japanese. 1945 is the year when he returned home in triumph, not of course as a major in the Red Army, but as supreme commander of the invincible Korean People’s Revolutionary Army.
The Tower of the Juche Idea was officially unveiled on the President’s 70th birthday in 1982. It is supposed to be the people’s birthday present to their beloved leader as well as a symbol to posterity of the immortality of the great Juche idea, Kim Il Sung’s idiosyncratic version of Marxism–Leninism, which for some reason is always rendered in English as the Juche Idea and not the Juche philosophy. The term Juche, roughly translated, means control of one’s own body; it expresses North Korea’s insistence on the importance of maintaining political and economic independence and on preserving its distinctive national culture and identity. The North Korean obsession with preserving autonomy probably has its roots in the experience of Japanese colonial rule. Apparently Japanese rule was very harsh and part of the colonialism programme was to eradicate all traces of Korean national culture and to replace Korean with Japanese as the national language. The obsession was subsequently reinforced by fears of becoming politically and economically subordinate to either of its powerful northern neighbours. I have been told by Eastern European Korea experts that the emphasis on Juche and the presidential personality cult really took off during the sixties at a time of strained relations with the other socialist countries.

The city of Pyongyang is situated at the confluence of the Taedong River and its tributary, the River Potang. Pyongyang is the administrative and cultural centre of the DPRK, and a city of light industry. The country’s heavy industry bases are located elsewhere, most notably in the northeastern cities of Hamhung and Chongjin. In Pyongyang the banks of the Potang and Taedong Rivers are not lined with factories. They have been landscaped with trees and flowers to form attractive pleasure parks. Through the centre of the city flows the River Taedong, and at the very heart of the capital, central to the two principal bridges, the open expanse of Kim Il Sung Square is situated on the west bank, dominated by the Grand People’s Study House, a genuinely impressive piece of architecture constructed in tiers, each tier surmounted by a traditional Korean blue-tiled hip-saddle roof. Directly opposite on the east bank stands the Tower of the Juche Idea, a tapering pillar of white granite blocks one hundred and seventy metres tall, capped by a big, blood-red
plastictorch on a gilt plinth, which looks a bit tacky in the daylight but has a pleasantly eerie effect at night, when it glows like a sombre lighthouse in the Pyongyang sky – but only until ten o’clock when they have to switch it off to save electricity. There is a viewing gallery beneath the torch which commands a fine view of the city.

At the foot of the tower there is a perfectly monstrous bronze trio statue, thirty metres high and weighing thirty-three tons, comprising a beefy lady waving a sickle, a workman with a hammer and a man in a suit holding up a pen. These apparently signify worker, peasant and working intellectual, displaying ‘the spirit of our people forging vigorously ahead under the banner of the Party’ (Korean Review, p. 195). Significantly in their free hands all three figures are holding books. Workers and peasants are not permitted to be numbskulls in the brave new world of Juche. On either side of the tower extend immaculate gardens adorned with bright flowers, fountains, and more appalling statues. Pyongyang abounds in tasteless statuary, all of it produced not a hundred yards from the Ansan Chodasso at the Mansudae Arts Factory – none of these bourgeois individualists wrestling with their private visions in lonely studios in the DPRK.

Paradoxically, although quite a few of Pyongyang’s public buildings, all of its statues and ninety per cent of its mosaics and murals fail to meet any accepted canons of good taste, the overall aesthetic impression of the city is actually quite pleasant. In fact by night on high days and holidays, when they are not economising on electricity and the ubiquitous multi-coloured neon lights are flashing from the façades of all the buildings and the fountains are in full flow, Pyongyang has a lot of charm.

It is a curious paradox, this discrepancy between the total aesthetic impact of Pyongyang and the sum of its parts. There are two reasons for it. First of all, it is a very green city. There are well-tended trees and flowers everywhere. Consequently it is an infinitely more attractive city in the summer months than in the winter. Secondly, the public buildings and monuments are designed by essentially working-class architects and artists with essentially proletarian tastes, which they share with an essentially very unsophisticated public. I gather there was only
a very small bourgeois class in the northern half of Korea at the time of liberation in 1945. Doubtless by 1953 many representatives of this class had taken the opportunity to migrate to the South amid the confusion of war. In the early years after his assumption of power, there are many allusions in the President’s speeches to the need to temper suspicion of educated people as anti-revolutionary and erstwhile collaborators with the Japanese with understanding and fair treatment. So presumably many of his supporters were giving the old middle classes a tough time of it. Although the inhabitants of North Korea are an attractive and graceful people, theirs is a peasant grace and attractiveness. The ladies of Pyongyang, for example, have not lost the knack of gliding over the uneven pavements with awkward bundles nonchalantly poised on top of their heads. It is far more than the quality of their clothes that marks out at a glance the Korean expatriates visiting their homeland from Japan as belonging to a more civilized world than their native cousins. When one encounters a North Korean with what we in the bourgeois countries would immediately identify as a middle-class manner and demeanour, it is rare enough as to be memorable. What you have then in North Korea is not inferior cultural objects being designed for a mass public in a condescending manner by people who personally have quite different tastes, as is the case with cheap commercial art in the West, but artists and craftsmen producing objects that they genuinely like for an appreciative public. Their sincerity and passion informs and redeems what ought to be irredeemable. The North Koreans taken on intense pride in what they perceive as the beauty of their reconstructed capital. They always refer to it as ‘ur Pyongyang’, our Pyongyang. And the Tower of the Juche Idea, symbol of the single monolithic ideology that informs every aspect of life in the DPRK and is intended to do so for eternity, is their favourite monument. I sensed that my interpreter was a bit peeved when I seemed to be taking more interest in the surrounding gardens and fountains than in the tower itself.

‘These are not good flowers’, he said reproachfully as I stopped to admire a bed of exotic purple flowers. ‘We have much better flowers than these in the Botanical Gardens.’
I was particularly attracted to the tunnel fountains that arch the terraces that lead down from the gardens to the embankment. These provide a great summer entertainment for the small children of Pyongyang. The game is to duck down low and try and race from one end of the tunnel to the other without getting wet. It is a game whose failure brings its own rewards. They always seemed to regard getting drenched from head to toe as a wonderful joke. If their parents were likely to get cross with them when they got home, the prospect did not appear to worry them. It is virtually an official party policy in the DPRK that children are the kings and queens of the country, and the kids always struck me as being cheerfully aware of their elevated status.

The following morning I was taken to the Museum of the Korean Revolution. This turned out to be a monster. In the words of the official handbook, it is ‘a great immortal monument of the Korean revolution, an edifice dedicated to the education in the Juche idea. It contains priceless historical mementoes and material illustrating graphically the glorious revolutionary history, enduring revolutionary services, wise guidance and lofty qualities of the great revolutionary leader Comrade Kim Il Sung, peerless patriot, national hero, ever-victorious, iron-willed, brilliant commander and one of the outstanding leaders of the international communist and working-class movements.’

The museum is situated in a prominent position at the top of Mansudae Hill. It has ninety rooms and a floor space of over 50,000 square metres, which makes it a hell of a big museum to cover barely sixty years in the history of one small nation from the time that the Great Leader set out to meet his tryst with destiny to the present day. Slap bang in the middle in front of the building there is an enormous bronze statue of the man himself. There is at least one in every major town. On either side of the president’s statue are two huge sprawling group bronzes, each consisting of well over a hundred life-size figures. One depicts soldiers fighting for the liberation of Korea, the other the civilian masses hard at work building the socialist construction. The façade of the building itself is devoted to a large mosaic of Lake Chon, the deepest mountain lake in the world. Lake Chon occupies a vast crater that was created by
the last volcanic eruption of Mount Paekdu, a sprawling mountain in the extreme north of Korea near the Manchurian border. It occupies a special place in the mythology of the Korean revolution. Being high, remote, bitterly cold and densely forested, it was a suitable stronghold for the guerrilla movement in which Kim Il Sung played his part in the nineteen thirties. Legend has it that the Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il, was born there in a humble log cabin in 1942. The truth is that he was born in rather more salubrious surroundings in the Soviet Union. Lake Chon, as Mount Paekdu’s most distinctive feature, is depicted all over the place in North Korea. The massive entrance hall of the museum is notable for a particularly large and gruesome example of the murals that dominate the main hall or entrance of just about every public building of any size in the dprk. This one portrays him in his fatherly marshal role standing in the forefront of his smiling constituents, holding the hand of a little boy in his right hand and with his left arm draped round a little girl’s shoulder.

I was relieved to hear that I was not going to be conducted round the whole of the museum. My tour would be confined to an inspection of the first twenty-six rooms, the rooms dedicated to material associated with the years of struggle against the Japanese colonial rule. I was further reassured when it became apparent that my English speaking guide was going to conform to a pattern that I already recognised as being typically North Korean of reciting her lines mechanically while leading me at a brisk pace from one room to the next. It was like being on a conveyor belt. You were naturally expected to look and listen but you were not invited to linger or ask questions. I was not going to be late for lunch.

In the event I could not resist interrupting her flow with a couple of banal questions just to test whether this attractive young woman really was as fluent in English as she sounded. Even her pronunciation was excellent. But her delivery was just so mechanical one had the feeling that she might have learned the one long recital off by heart and that was the extent of her knowledge of the English language. She had no difficulty in answering my questions and showed that she was indeed the master of at least one foreign language and quite intelligent generally. This left me
wondering whether she could really believe in what she was saying, or if a lifetime’s exposure to continuous propaganda had so blunted her critical faculties as to render her incapable of realising that she was not working in a museum of history at all, but in a temple dedicated to the worship of a mythological demigod. It would be wrong of me to exaggerate the grossness of the contents of the Korean Revolution Museum.

The first text I was given to revise after my arrival in Pyongyang purported to be a memoir of the days of anti-Japanese struggle. I never subsequently saw it in print so they must have wisely decided later that it was not suitable for foreign consumption. It explicitly stated in this book that it was not the atomic bombs that brought the Japanese to surrender but the inexorable southward advance into the homeland of the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army. The Red Army does get a mention but in such a way as to suggest that it was playing an auxiliary role in the invasion.

There was no attempt in to museum to perpetrate such huge lies. There was a guerrilla resistance movement against the Japanese in the northern border area of Korea and in south Manchuria, in which Kim Il Sung took part. No doubt in 1937 he did lead a band of guerrillas who succeeded in establishing temporarily a liberated zone in the remote fastnesses of Mount Paekdu. A whole room is devoted to a diorama of a tiny battle that took place in a little border town called Pochonbo, for the guerrillas a brilliant success but scarcely a pinprick to the Imperial Japanese Empire. No elaborate explanation was attempted as to how this hardy but basically insignificant guerrilla outfit was supposed to have succeeded in expelling the Japanese in 1945. No overt lies were told. Merely economy with the truth. The Red Army and Hiroshima were omitted from the story which was, moreover, reduced to the story of one man. Of all the other Koreans who had the courage to take up arms against the Japanese oppressor, only a handful qualify for an honourable mention in despatches and the only qualities they are credited for are bravery, patriotism and, above all, boundless loyalty to the Great Leader.

The only celebrity from those years who is granted more than a passing mention is that ‘indomitable woman revolutionary fighter’, Comrade
Kim Jong Suk. Kim Jong Suk was the first wife of Kim Il Sung and mother of the Dear Leader. She has been dead for nearly forty years. This makes her a doubly suitable subject for revolutionary canonisation. She has her own special shrine on the lines of Mangyondae at her home village of Hoenyong, up in the north of the country. She also occupies pride of place in the revolutionary martyrs’ cemetery, another important sacred revolutionary site, on Mount Taesong on the outskirts of Pyongyang.

Ludicrous as it was, I found my outing to the Museum of the Korean Revolution most entertaining. That afternoon, the sanity and normality of the Korean Central History Museum, a much smaller establishment dealing with the previous two or three thousand years of Korean history, came as a dull anti-climax.

It was later that afternoon that I had my first negative experience of Korea. Mr Ming came to the Ansan Chodasso with an interpreter to discuss my terms of service. I assumed this was going to be a formality and at first everything he said tallied with the information on the job description I received with my application form. I would be working a forty-five hour week, eight hours a day Monday to Friday and five hours on Saturday morning. I would receive free board and lodging. I would receive a free packet of tipped Korean cigarettes every day. My fridge would be daily replenished with supplies of fruit, soft drinks and mineral water. I would be taken on trips from time to time to places of interest outside Pyongyang. Then he offered me just over half the advertised salary.

I felt as if I had been given an electric shock. I had given up a secure job in England and flown out to the other side of the world. I had no money to fly back again, and even if I had, North Korea is not a country where you can just saunter down to the local travel agency and book yourself a flight. I still entertained a few groundless fears and misgivings about the country based on the sinister image it has in the West. And here I was stranded in Pyongyang, being offered a totally inadequate sum of money. At a loss for words, I stood up and fetched from my drawer the job description I had received in England and pointed to the salary explicitly stated on it. I emphasised that I would never have dreamed of applying for the job on the basis of anything less.
They argued that there had been a mistake. The salary they had advertised was what they paid to experienced revisers who had been with them for some years. I had only just arrived. They did not yet know what my capabilities would be. They told me that both Michael and Jean-Jacques, the young French reviser, were working on the lower salary. I replied that their situations were quite different from mine and that if there had been a mistake, it was their mistake and not mine. I had applied for a job on the basis of the salary they had actually advertised and nothing less. In the end, they asked me to work on the lower salary for the first month. They asked to borrow the job description I had received. They said they would have to show it to the publishing house hierarchy but I could rest assured the matter would be sorted out satisfactorily. In the circumstances I reluctantly agreed to this arrangement.

It was then that I had my only ever first-hand encounter with graft and corruption in the DPRK. The interpreter asked me if I had brought any English or American cigarettes with me. He said that Mr Ming had said that if he was going to advance my cause at the publishing house a packet of imported cigarettes would not go amiss. It seemed a modest enough bribe. I came to realise later that Mr Ming had said no such thing. The interpreter had taken advantage of the fact that Mr Ming did not speak a word of English, on the correct assumption that if I gave Mr Ming a pack of cigarettes I would give him one too. Poor Mr Ming would have been outraged if he had known what was being said on his behalf, but as he thought the cigarettes were an unsolicited gift, he accepted them gratefully.

North Koreans are expected to maintain very high standards of personal honesty. Their code is so strict that it is unacceptable for taxi drivers, barmaids and waitresses to accept tips. During the time I was there gaping cracks began to appear in the code but at the time I arrived the majority still adhered to it. This interpreter’s soliciting of cigarettes from me was, I later learned from other revisers who knew him well, quite characteristic of him and most uncharacteristic of other Koreans up to that time. Shortly after my arrival he was sent off much to his chagrin to work in one of the country’s enterprises in West Africa.
Many Koreans do not relish the prospect of an overseas posting. Just as most foreigners find life in the DPRK insupportable because it is so different from the rest of the planet, so many North Koreans have difficulty in adjusting when they are thrown into the outside world. The consensus of opinion was that the authorities had become aware of his little idiosyncrasies and being sent abroad was his punishment. It seemed a harsh penalty for the sort of behaviour which in the rest of the world would have been classed as mere mischievousness. On the other hand, giving somebody a job which no-one wanted is not on a par with sending a chap to a labour camp in Siberia. Whatever else North Korea may be, it is not that sort of society.

It was fully a month before Mr Ming returned to see me again and told me that they would pay the proper salary, although he did contrive to squeeze a couple more weeks out of me at the reduced rate. I had not been overly anxious. By then I had realised that they would fly me straight back home again if I insisted, and that would be a very bad investment for them. I also realised there never had been any mistake in the salary quoted. It was just that they had subsequently found a couple of young men who had been prepared to work for them for substantially less so they thought they would try out the same trick on me. Mr Ming’s gesture of borrowing the job description to show to his superiors at the publishing house was just a ruse to save face and at the same time save the publishing house a few hundred dollars. He then deliberately made me wait as long as possible in the hope that I would back down and retract my demand. In this respect the traditional spirit of Asia is still alive in the DPRK, the spirit of the bazaar where prices are not fixed but reached by a process of bargaining. The difference is that in other Asian countries bargaining is now confined to the bazaar. The North Koreans have yet to learn that it is no way to do business with the outside world in the late twentieth century.

At the time I was inclined to be philosophical about being underpaid for a few weeks. The sense of adventure at being somewhere as unusual as North Korea had not yet worn off and my initial impressions of the country were almost unconditionally favourable, to such an extent that I
began a letter to a friend in those early days, ‘Fraternal greetings from Chosen, land of morning calm and dawn of new home for mankind.’ Well … Chosen incidentally is what the Koreans call their country, and means land of morning calm. The name Korea, by which the rest of the world knows it, derives from Koryo, the name of the largest and most powerful of three feudal kingdoms which occupied the territory of Korea in the middle ages.

It was difficult at the worst of times to sustain much animosity for long against the North Koreans. They are such kind, gentle people. Besides, although I was blind to a lot of things at first, I was not blind to the fact that although they had abolished squalor the country was poor, and that by Korean standards the salary that I rejected was a King’s ransom.

Why was I initially so enamoured of this society as to perceive it as representing a potential new dawn for mankind? First of all, I brought to Pyongyang a very positive and sympathetic attitude. I also came with a firm belief that the principal objective of any society ought to be the rational exploitation and equitable distribution of its material resources.

From the perspective of such an attitude and belief, I observe this obscure little country that was in total ruins less than forty years ago. It is evidently still a poor country. There are few cars on the road and most of them are old. Some of them date back to the fifties. They have installed street lamps but for reasons of economy they do not use them. For reasons of economy they only supply cold water to domestic premises in the summer months. The people do not wear expensive clothes. They form long queues for dilapidated buses and trolley buses which are forever breaking down and which become as crowded and congested as the trams in Calcutta – except that in Pyongyang people refrain from clambering onto the roof or hanging from the windows. The shops and stores are sad places offering a narrow range of unexciting goods.

Nevertheless, there is no squalor. There is no immediate indication of abject poverty. Everybody is adequately provided with food, shelter, and clothing. This is no mean achievement. How many thousands are homeless in Britain in 1988? There is an eleven-year free compulsory
education system. There is free health care. The world’s nastier epidemic
diseases have been eradicated there. Pyongyang is so clean and neat and,
for the most part, odourless as a stockbroker suburb. I know that all
the apartment blocks were provided with a centralised central heating
system. I did not yet know how inefficient it could be. Nevertheless,
Pyongyang is not a place where old people die of hypothermia when the
January temperatures reach twenty below as they regularly do. The DPRK
seemed to me a society which had its priorities right. I was impressed. I
should add that to a considerable extent I still am. Initially I estimated
that the people were enjoying a low European standard of living. Later I
had to revise this estimate far, far downwards.

Not only does Pyongyang score high marks for cleanliness, it is also
the world’s safest city. Anyone, male or female, can walk the unlit streets
at any hour of the day or night with as much fear of being robbed
or molested as in a Shropshire village on a wet Thursday afternoon.
There is some crime of course, and the indications are that it is one the
increase, but the rate is tiny by world standards. There may well be a
draconian penal code in force. That is not the sort of thing that is easily
found out. There are plenty of policemen about. I did not realise this
at first because the police uniforms are indistinguishable from those
of the soldiers, except that the police wear green collar tabs while the
soldiers wear red. However, Pyongyang definitely does not have the
oppressive atmosphere of a police state. The people conform partly
because they are very closely supervised but largely because they have
been very thoroughly conditioned.

But what impressed me more than anything else during these early
weeks in Pyongyang was the people. During my years as a social worker
I formed an intimate acquaintance with the psychological effects of
failure within the capitalist system, a system in which it is structurally
inherent that some people must fail, a system that currently operates in
my country in such a way that rather a lot of people fail rather badly.
Strictly in material terms, the giro recipients whom I used to visit on the
meanner council estates and in the run-down inner city areas of Leeds
were affluent by the standards of nearly all North Koreans. But it is not
ultimately the material deprivation that erodes the soul and extracts the joy from living. It is the concomitant alienation, the boredom, the sense of helplessness, above all the lack of self-esteem. When people are trapped in circumstances in which it is impossible for them to define themselves through their actions in ways that will obtain for them adequate confirmation that they are successful human beings, the inevitable consequence is that they feel bad about themselves. People who feel bad about themselves tend to behave badly or become apathetic and let themselves slide. People manifest their inner selves in their appearance and behaviour. You do not have to talk to dispossessed people in Britain to know that many of them are not getting their fair share of joy from life. You only have to look at them.

You only have to look at the citizens of Pyongyang to know that they feel ok about themselves. They take good care of their appearance. Their clothes may be few and simple but they wear them with pride. They take a keen interest in their hairstyles partly, I expect, because visiting one of Pyongyang’s innumerable hairdressing salons is one of the leading unorganised social activities available in what to anyone who knows any different is an unbearably dull life. The people carry themselves well. Theirs is a society in which everyone is assigned a role to play, everyone has something to do and somewhere to go, but no-one is, under normal circumstances, in too much of a rush. When I first arrived, fresh from the European pace of life, I kept finding my progress along the pavements held up by sauntering groups of Koreans. Gradually over the weeks I fell into the local rhythm. The people have an air of unassuming dignity. They are told that they are masters of the state and of society. By any reasonable criteria this is an enormous con, but they believe it. They are taught that everything in the society exists for them and belongs to them. They are a very likeable people. They are gentle, courteous, friendly and considerate. The girls who cleaned my rooms, served my meals, served me beer in the hotel bars, exemplified all these virtues, but without undue servility or deference. The doorman at the plush Koryo Hotel used to politely nod and say good evening when I arrived and if I asked him to he would efficiently rustle up a taxi for me when
I left, but he would always look me in the eye and never addressed me as sir. Sometimes at the end of his shift he would go up to the first floor, still in his uniform, and play pool with the guests. I question whether a doorman at, say, the London Hilton would have the confidence to do that even if it was permitted.
On the whole the Koreans are a physically attractive people, slightly built and graceful. The women have sweet faces and melodious voices. Some of the men used to look a bit dour. I sometimes used to have the feeling that the women were more at home in their bizarre culture than the men. This is surprising because, although everyone in North Korea leads an incredibly hard-working and monotonous life, it is a culture in which the women have the tougher time. Politically the women have equal rights and have done since 1946. The Sex Equality Law promulgated in that year was one of the president’s first major reforms. At work, in the factories and one the construction sites, the women work alongside the men, sharing all but the most back-breaking physical toil. In the home it is a different story. From the moment the woman gets up half an hour before the husband to boil the rice for breakfast, she has everything to do. The typical Korean male does not lift a finger to help.

My guess is that the men suffer more than the women from the lack of good, unwholesome, irresponsible fun. There are hardly any outlets for unorganised social activity away from the workplace – a picnic perhaps with friends on a fine day, for the better-off an occasional visit to a restaurant. There is no night life for the local population at all. Korean men love to drink and their ladies are not averse to the occasional indulgence, but the supply of alcohol in the shops is limited to weekends and public holidays. The government does not want people waking up with hangovers when there are revolution and construction to be made. Nor does it wish to encourage too much informal conviviality. Throughout history bars and cafés where people can come together to relax and talk over a few drinks have been potential hotbeds of seditious ideas. The only vice routinely available to the North Korean male is tobacco, and most are avid smokers. For women it is unacceptable to smoke except, curiously, in old age.

But as ninety per cent of North Koreans know next to nothing about the outside world, they do not conceive of themselves as deprived. The
people are constantly told that they are living in a workers’ paradise. Most of them in their ignorance probably believe it.

There is, however, one section of the population of the DPRK for whom life might realistically be described as something approaching paradise. I have never in my life encountered such a universally bright-eyed, charming, cheerful, polite and friendly species of humanity as the children of Pyongyang. Pyongyang is one third-world capital which has no wan, pitiful, ragged urchins on view.

I saw a lot of the children of Pyongyang because the whole of one block on the other side of the street from the Ansan Chodasso was taken up by schools for various age groups. The kids never ceased to find amusement at seeing a European on their streets. Whenever I caught their laughing eyes, the younger ones would bow or raise their right hands above their heads, elbows slightly bent, in the Children’s Union salute. When I used to reply with the Korean greeting, *anyon hasinmiga*, literally ‘have peace of mind’, they were so delighted. Sometimes they would run back so that they could stand in front of me and greet me again so as to hear this odd-looking anthropoid speak their language.

Children thrive on order and stability and these are qualities that North Korea has to offer in abundance. The children have the stability of a traditional Asian family life. Divorce is very rare and traditional kinship patterns, e.g., parents residing with the family of the eldest son, are routinely adhered to. The effects of any tension or unhappiness in the home are mitigated by the amount of time the children spend away from it. Even before compulsory education begins at the age of five, in excess of seventy per cent of the nation’s children are placed in day nurseries from the age of three months.

This practice is encouraged by the state for two reasons. Firstly, the state wants to promote the collectivist consciousness in the population from the earliest possible age. Secondly, it wants the women back at work. However much the North Koreans may harp on in their propaganda about the brilliant technological advances they are making and how modern and mechanical their industry and agriculture have become, the reality is quite the reverse. To quite an extraordinary extent the economy
is powered by human muscle. Every able body is required to keep the economic wheels turning. Therefore the majority of women resume work after five months’ maternity leave. Each morning the mother straps the baby on her back and delivers it to the nursery on her way to work. The official standard working week is forty-eight hours. This does not include time for meals and other breaks, compulsory political education, et cetera. It is safe to assume then that the majority of North Korean infants spend at least sixty hours a week in institutional care.

Childbirth can involve a change of job for the mother. The country cannot afford powdered milk so the mother must be employed close enough to the nursery to go there at regular intervals during the day to breast-feed the child. Quite a few enterprises have their own nurseries on the premises.

It is not generally compulsory for women to return to work after childbirth. About twenty-five per cent opt to remain at home. I do not know, but I would imagine that this option is denied to professional women and women in specialised occupations whom it has cost the state a lot of money to train, or who are not readily replaceable. Of these women, the majority of whom choose to return to work, few will be motivated by financial considerations. All the basic necessities of life, housing, food, fuel, furniture, some clothing, are supplied free or at a token cost and strict rationing controls are in force. The women return to work because for them work is not an undesired but economically necessary intrusion on their real life, their personal life. For the average Korean the workplace is where one participates in life. Or, viewed from a negative perspective, life does not have much else to offer in the DPRK.

So the North Korean child enjoys stability at home within an extended kinship network, the routine of nursery, kindergarten and school, and the security within the family that all primary physical needs will always be met. There is not a lot of scope for feelings of jealousy or alienation to arise growing up in a society where everyone is more or less identically poor, no one knows anything better, and everyone shares common cultural norms – no problems for working-class children having to adapt to middle-class values at school. All school children are identically
dressed in uniforms issued by the state. The streets are safe for the children to play in at all times. There is scarcely any traffic to worry about. There are no child molesters. It is most unlikely that a child will witness any disturbing scenes on the street of violence or other hysterical behaviour. In a society that is both so primitive and tightly controlled, deviance and perversion are virtually unknown.

The child may have few, if any, personal toys, but will have access to them at nursery and school. Lots of outdoor play apparatus, swings and climbing frames and so forth, are always erected in the spaces between the apartment blocks and in the school playgrounds.

With such a high degree of physical and emotional security, there is much to be said for growing up in the DPRK. To me this is quite a significant factor in the society’s favour.

Not so many years ago foreign language revisers were a rare commodity in North Korea. They were pampered beings who were accommodated in hotels and had a car and driver at their disposal twenty-four hours a day. They were even better paid. It was, I believe, 1984 when the rate of pay was cut by twenty-five per cent to take account of the strength of the dollar. The dollar has taken a few tumbles since then but the pay remained the same.

Although still living a life of opulence by local standards, the revisers have, as they say out there, being working-classized somewhat. By the time I arrived in Pyongyang, they were all accommodated together in the Ansan Chodasso. The Ansan Chodasso is one of three six-storey blocks, each consisting of twelve half-floors set in a pleasant compound near the Potang River in south-west Pyongyang. The other two blocks were reserved for party members. They were quite old by Pyongyang standards, probably built in the sixties, but a family assigned to one of these apartments would have had a flat of European dimensions, a rare luxury in North Korea. It is strictly forbidden for the Koreans to invite foreigners into their homes so I never had the chance to look round any other apartments. However, while I was there they were proudly proclaiming
in their external propaganda that the new apartments they were building in Pyongyang had an average floor area of one hundred and ten square metres. It is safe to assume then that most existing accommodation is substantially smaller. I am fairly sure that most families had just two rooms and a kitchen.

We were not living among the élite, but we were definitely among the haute bourgeoisie. From time to time one would see one of those distinctive features of the Pyongyang landscape, a Mercedes with blacked-out windows to conceal the passengers from the public gaze, coming in or out of the compound to convey our neighbours on official business. None of them was important enough to warrant a car for his exclusive use but I doubt if there are a thousand cadres in the whole country who are afforded such a privilege. We did have from November, 1987, one neighbour, a vice minister I was told, of sufficient status to quality for a twenty-four hour police guard. From then on three able-bodied young men of twenty-four, each armed with a revolver, took it in turns to sit in a little hut at the entrance to the compound furnished with a desk, a chair, a telephone and the inevitable photographs of the Great and Dear Leaders, in the world’s safest city and do precisely nothing.

During my year of exile the population of the Ansan Chodasso fluctuated but at its peak there were seventeen foreign residents. There were three Chinese revisers; two East Germans, a married couple with a six-year-old daughter who attended school at the German embassy; two Cuban (or Spanish) plus the wife of one of them; two Russians plus again a wife; two English; two French; and a Lebanese who did the Arabic. The Russian contingent were unique in that they cooked for themselves. The rest of us took our meals in three separate dining rooms on the second floor, or half-floor to be more precise. The three Chinese gentlemen occupied one dining room, the Cubans and East Germans another. The remainder of us occupied a third. We had the common denominator that we were all from capitalist countries. Fortunately for me, there was a second common denominator, that everyone spoke English.

The revisers in the capitalist zone who had come to Pyongyang independently were paid several times as much as the ones from the
socialist countries, who were there on contracts negotiated by their
governments with the Koreans. I could not be certain, but I suspect
that the Russians and Germans were better paid than their counterparts
from Cuba and it was fairly obvious that the Chinese had about as much
spending power as their Korean hosts, i.e., virtually none at all.

It is possible that the revisers from the socialist countries may have
been paid some allowance in hard currency but the bulk of their salary
seemed to be paid in blue won. In North Korea there is a three-tier
currency system in operation. There is the basic unit of currency, the
naked, unadorned won. This is only valid in shops for the locals where,
essentially, there is nothing worth buying. As a result there is no currency
black market in the DPRK. Then there is the blue won, so called because
the notes are imprinted with a blue stamp. This is issued in exchange for
soft currencies. Finally there is the red won which bears a red stamp. This
is issued in exchange for hard currencies, dollars, sterling, yen et cetera.
The blue won is acceptable in some but not all dollar shops and interna-
tional hotels, but there is a two-tier pricing system in operation, if system
it can be called. For while some cheap foodstuffs cost the same in blue or
red money, a packet of imported cigarettes cost two won forty chen in red
money but more than fourteen won in blue. Between these two extremes
the price differences were more commonly double or treble in blue.

Because of language barriers, the Chinese, Russians and Cubans
tended to keep to themselves within the Ansan Chodasso. However,
they all had social outlets through their embassies. The inhabitants of
the red won zone plus the East German couple, Holmer and Astrid,
who both spoke good English, interacted socially with each other to
varying degrees. Relationships were on the whole civilized and cordial.
This was just as well. Opportunities for normal informal contact with
the local population were severely limited. Consequently, from the
onset of winter at the end of October, when the hotels rapidly emptied
until they started filling up again in the beginning of April, there was
practically no-one else to talk to except each other. During those long,
cold, monotonous, boring, lonely months of winter, my enthusiasm for
the country evaporated faster than boiling water.
The Ansan Chodasso’s contingent from the capitalist countries consisted of myself and Michael from England, Jean-Jacques and Simone from France, and Sami from Lebanon. Unlike the vast majority of foreigners who find themselves cast up in Pyongyang, unlike me once my initial euphoria had worn off, they all to a greater or lesser extent liked the life out there. They were all there when I arrived and none of them had any urgent plans to go at the time I left, except Simone, who had decided to retire.

Jean-Jacques, like Michael, was in his early twenties. He had come to Pyongyang by a curious route. On graduation from university in Paris in 1985, he had secured a grant from the French government to go to Beijing and learn Chinese. At the Foreign Language University in Beijing, most of his classmates were Koreans. He found he had an enormous affinity with the Koreans, far more than with the Chinese. It was through the good offices of his student friends that he had come to work in Pyongyang as a reviser. He had already been living there nearly a year when I arrived. He had learned quite a bit of Korean, which opened the way for him to have some informal contact with the local population. During the day a couple of old Mercedes were allocated to us to ferry us to the publishing house or to the shops or anywhere around Pyongyang we wanted to go. Jean-Jacques spent a lot of time chatting to the drivers and to our cooks and interpreters. He also liked to hang out with the policemen at the compound gate. Occasionally he went to Korean restaurants with Korean friends he had made. He may only have assimilated himself marginally into North Korean society, but even marginal assimilation is far more than most foreigners achieve. Even the foreign students in North Korea who are sharing classes with Koreans are kept well segregated from them outside of the classroom. Although fascinated by the life and people in North Korea, Jean-Jacques felt the need to go up to Beijing for a week or two every couple of months for a breath of normality and was fortunate that he could afford to do so.

Simone was an intrepid lady in her sixties who had been a reviser
in North Korea since 1983. A childless divorcée, she preferred to do something more adventurous with her retirement than sit at home in Geneva. She too found a certain enchantment with the society and the people, as did my close friend Sami.

Sami was a communist and had long-standing connections with the North Koreans dating back to the early seventies. He had revised texts for them in Beirut and written articles about the country in the Lebanese newspapers. For these efforts he had been awarded an Omega watch with the president’s name inscribed on it, which gave him a status just a few rungs down from Labour Hero. He had spent several brief periods in the country before. Then in 1985 he had taken up semi-permanent residence in Pyongyang. He too spoke Korean quite well. When I used to complain about the boredom and monotony, he used to remind me that boredom and monotony had something to recommend them when you normally lived in Beirut. However, even Sami could only stand so much of Pyongyang. He had insisted to the publishing house that he was only prepared to work in Pyongyang for a maximum of nine months a year.

Sami was an excellent friend and his quiet humour helped to keep the lid on my sanity, which was continually under threat from the unreality of my life in Pyongyang and the absurdity of the work I was doing. He was a big miss when he migrated south for the winter like the sensible person he was, abandoning the frozen, silent city and its handful of deserted hotel bars.

Holmer was another who liked being in Pyongyang. He normally lectured in Korean at the Humboldt University in Berlin and had spent two years as a student in Pyongyang a decade earlier, when by all accounts life was even more restricted for foreigners than it is now. He had been back on several occasions as an interpreter for delegations, but this was his first opportunity to live in the country since his undergraduate days. He was a fluent Korean speaker and a Korea expert living in his field of professional study. He also had his family with him. If Holmer was in his element in Pyongyang, his wife Astrid did not share his enthusiasm. She was highly delighted when they were recalled to Berlin unexpectedly early.
One of the factors that fuelled my initial over-enthusiasm for North Korea was probably that my arrival in Pyongyang coincided with a flurry of treats and excursions that would not be repeated for a long time.

I had only been there a few days when I was taken with the rest of the revisers down to Kim Il Sung Square in a minibus to witness a torchlight parade to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Young Communist League.

Kim Il Sung Square is a wide expanse of granite flagstones beside the embankment of the Taedong River. At the top of the square, under the Grand People’s Study House facing the Juche Tower on the opposite bank, is the tribune, a spectators’ gallery a bit like a rather elegant football stand. At the centre of the tribune is an elevated, covered area where the dignitaries and high officials, including on the big occasions the president, take their places. On either side of what one might call the stand where the dignitaries can sit are the open terraces where the lesser mortals stand. As the tribune can only accommodate a few thousand people at the most and admission to any of the functions in the square is by invitation only, the lesser mortals are still quite elevated.

The interior of the tribune incidentally is intended eventually to serve as Kim Il Sung’s mausoleum where his mummified remains will be displayed to posterity, à la Lenin in Moscow and Mao in Beijing.

We arrived at about seven and took our place on the right-hand terrace, amid Pyongyang’s diplomatic community. I looked up in the hope that the president or his son might be present but sadly I did not have an opportunity to see either of them in the flesh during my whole time in Pyongyang. The square below was filled with row upon row of young people in alternate lines of boys and girls, all identically dressed, the boys in black trousers and white shorts, the girls in white blouses and their navy blue school smocks.

In the DPRK children must wear their school uniform at all times throughout their school career. Under the eleven-year compulsory education system, children must enter kindergarten at five, proceed
the following year to primary school for four years, and then to Senior Middle School for a further six. In practice most children enter kindergarten at the age of four having already spent most of their life in nursery.

The boys wear navy blue vindon suits, the girls navy blue vindon smocks. The state provides all school equipment including uniforms at token cost. The uniforms are smart, practical and hardwearing, and impose a rigid egalitarianism on the world of the child, which is highly conducive to promoting the collectivist spirit. Although there are differences in living standards between different strata of society, small by the standards of other societies but there nevertheless, these cannot be expressed in the clothing of the children, not even in their footwear, jumpers and blouses, because the range available in the shops is so narrow. Even when they leave school, the young people who progress to further or higher education must still adhere to strict conformity in dress. The students wear green uniforms like old-fashioned grammar school and high school uniforms in England.

I would imagine that all the children of fifteen and sixteen years of age from every school in Pyongyang were assembled in Kim Il Sung Square that evening. I am no good judge of size or distance but I would hazard a guess that the square is about two hundred yards long by a hundred yards wide and it was full of boys and girls, line after line of them. I do not know how long they had been standing there already when we arrived. It was still light when we came, and another half hour was to elapse before the last light of day ebbed from the sky. Then the torches were ignited and the vast square became a blaze of light. Above the blaze of light in the square glowed the dark red torch of the Juche Tower. The twin fountains that have been installed right in the middle of the Taedong River sent jets of water thirty feet into the air. On the façades of the building that flank the square, ideological symbols and slogans were announced in neon and speakers pumped stirring music into the teeming silence.

Then with astonishing precision and co-ordination this vast crowd of youthful torch-bearers began to assemble themselves into a variety of intricate groups so that the light from their torches formed a series
of patterns, shapes and symbols, some of which echoed the ones picked out more permanently in neon to the sides of them. At the same time the unoccupied road between the square and the tribune filled with complementary symbols as a vast parade of the nation’s youth, phalanx after phalanx, all bearing torches, marched briskly by. The parade went on for an hour and a half. I was not sure I approved of what I was seeing. It evoked half-remembered images of old newsreel cuttings of Germany in the thirties. But I found it impossible not to feel a slight sense of exhilaration.

I asked the interpreter who was with me how long it would have taken them to rehearse such a large and intricate spectacle.

‘A week at the most’, he replied.

Then he added, ‘This country owes a great debt to the Americans. They made us become a very disciplined people. We have had to be to survive. The other great favour they did us was when they bombed us to the ground they blew up all the churches as well, and put an end to Christianity in this country.’

That sort of irony was rare in a North Korean. I liked this interpreter very much. He was the same one who accompanied me on my first two days when I was sightseeing. After that evening I never saw him again. That is the way of things in the DPRK. We had no further business together, and if a foreigner and a Korean have no business together, they have no business meeting.

Although things are easing up considerably, the DPRK is still a country where informal contact between foreigners and locals is discouraged and restricted. There do not seem to be any firm guidelines on whether locals can meet foreigners in public places but there are very few public places, apart from the street and a handful of restaurants, to which both have free access. Koreans are not, for example, allowed in the international hotels except on business. In the absence of firm guidelines, most Koreans anyway fight shy of arranging contact for fear of getting into trouble. Koreans are not supposed to call on foreigners and are definitely not allowed to bring them into their homes. I suspect this policy is sold to the locals on the grounds of national security. The country is under siege
from the forces of imperialism and you never know who might turn out to be a spy or saboteur.

The real reason is that the government does not want the foreigner to find out from the local the real conditions under which people are living because it wants the rest of the world in general, and the South Korean people in particular, to think that things are a lot better than they actually are. Even more to the point, they do not want the local to find out from the foreigner that the world in general, and South Korea in particular, are not as he has been told – in short, that he is being fed lies. They want the people to go on believing that if they are not living in a paradise already, they soon will be. If the ruling circles have finally admitted to themselves that the South Korean people are never going to rise up in revolt out of jealousy of the prosperity of the North and demand to be assimilated into a reunified Juche Korea, they have yet to admit it to their people, who are still being exhorted to work harder and tighten their belts to hasten reunification. The danger for the ruling circles today is that if the masses in the North knew how prosperous their compatriots in the South were, it is they who might become rebellious.

To put things in a fair perspective, North Korean living standards are firmly rooted in third-world poverty, as I gradually discovered. On the other hand, it is a country that has a commendable record of supplying the whole population with the essentials of decent living, food, housing, hygiene, literacy and a subjectively happy life experience. The average North Korean lives an incredibly simple and hardworking life but also has a secure and cheerful existence, and the comradeship between these highly collectivised people is moving to behold.

It could reasonably be argued that it is in the people’s best interests to be allowed to continue living in a dream. It is only the ones who know or suspect that they are living in a dream in whom one can detect any discontent. Even then these people are so highly indoctrinated that their discontent is more likely to take the form of sorrow and frustration that their system is not succeeding than anger and rejection of it.

The minibus made slow progress leaving the square that night, edging through droves of youngsters making their way home on foot. It must
have been a long evening for them. Two-and-a-half hours is a long time to be on your feet if you can’t shuffle about at will. But if it had been a chore for them, it didn’t show. They all seemed highly animated and excited and groups of them kept bursting out into spontaneous song.

The sort of mass spectacular we saw that evening is something of a Korean speciality. I was to see another example the following week, albeit only on the screen. To commemorate some anniversary or other we were invited down to the International Club to see a film show. We were shown two films. One was a Korean feature film of which the less said the better. The other was a documentary of a parade through Kim Il Sung Square by a million people on August 15th, 1983, the fortieth anniversary of the country’s liberation. The parade was startling and impressive in itself but I was even more interested in the footage of the president presiding in the tribune. It was my first chance to have a good look at him in action. Up to then I had only seen photographs, paintings and murals.

One thing for sure about President Kim Il Sung is that he is a most extraordinary man. He has survived in power for over forty years in spite of numerous crises and power struggles, including a disastrous war. Although the success of his long reign is open to question, there is no doubt that as far as the overwhelming majority of the people are concerned, he is the Great Leader. Even the younger, better informed people who want change, who are anxious to see an end to austerity and for their country to liberalise – it should be emphasised, incidentally, that they do not want to fundamentally change their system – revere their president.

No matter how much propaganda is pumped out about a man being the Great Leader and the father of the nation, if the people are to be truly convinced, the man has to look the part.

The most common image of Kim Il Sung you see in Korea, the one on the photographs in every room, the one on so many of the murals, dates back twenty years. He is wearing a high-button Chairman Mao jacket. His expression is unsmiling and severe. But the rotund, elderly gentleman with the broad smile I watched on the screen that day not only
exuded enormous presence and dignity, but it was a presence imbued with an almost Pickwickian benignity.

It occurred to me as I was watching this film that I had come to Pyongyang expecting to be living in a grim, rigidly ordered society presided over by an austere dictator. What in fact it felt like and continued to feel like was living in a very strict boarding school run by a kindly but firm and autocratic headmaster. To what extent his powers actually are autocratic is open to debate. Sami always took the view that the Kim Il Sung personality cult was the creation of the party and that it is the party that is in control in North Korea. Apart from the fact that this view is in contradiction of the officially stated ideology about the leader, I doubt whether the president could have designated his son as heir apparent unless he possessed absolute authority.

For the thing that struck me most in this film after the president’s undeniable presence was his son’s singular lack of presence. Kim Jong Il is a short, plump, almost effeminate looking man in his mid-forties. His main claim to fame seems to be that he has systematised and elaborated the Juche idea, which remains a rather nebulous concept in the references scattered through his father’s work over the years, into a coherent ideological system. He is usually seen on films trailing around in his father’s footsteps and looking decidedly uncomfortable. Interestingly he is not often seen on television although his activities are extensively reported. Nor is he present except on very rare occasions when his father receives foreign delegations. In most Korean homes and workplaces his photograph is now displayed alongside that of his father, but I never sensed any strong public emotion about him. The propaganda machine is working energetically to build up his public image but his unprepossessing appearance poses a major problem.

Autumn is a very pleasant season in Korea. When summer ends, the humidity level plummets but it remains very calm. From early September until well into October, one can rely on what we would describe as perfect English summer weather. During the autumn there are two important
anniversaries in the North Korean calendar when the people are allowed a rare day off from building the revolution and construction to go and enjoy themselves. September 9th is the anniversary of the founding of the Republic in 1948. October 10th is the anniversary of the founding of the party in 1945. Whenever they are allowed any free time the North Koreans’ favourite recreational activity is picnicking out of doors.

On both public holidays the revisers were ferried out to the hills outside Pyongyang and treated to lavish picnics. In a country where economising and not wasting anything are sometimes carried to ludicrous extremes, the opposite policy prevails when it comes to putting on a show to impress the foreigner. Invariably far more food was provided at these affairs than could possibly be consumed. The first time I was appalled at the amount of food that was wasted. That was before I had realised what people's living standards were really like, or had discovered that because the country’s animal husbandry is in such a disastrous state, that year’s fish exports, normally a valuable hard currency earner, had had to be cancelled so that the people could have something now and then to augment their frugal diet of rice and pickled vegetables.

Our picnics may have been unnecessarily extravagant but they were always jolly occasions helped along by general quantities of Pyongyangsul, the local equivalent of vodka, full of chemicals but ok now and again, and compulsory singing. Towards the end of the meal everybody was always expected to take it in turns to stand up and sing a song. The Koreans can be very persistent people, so it was virtually impossible to wriggle out of it completely, but one could usually get away with groaning through a few lines of *Blowing in the Wind*.

People are always singing in North Korea. They sing at picnics and other social gatherings. They sing on trains. The school children sing as they march – literally march in columns four abreast – along the street. It is not uncommon to hear the workers toiling on the construction site break into the occasional chorus. Kim Sung, who had a voice like a skylark, used to sing as she cleaned my rooms in the morning, breaking off incongruously when she came to the bathroom sink to expectorate enthusiastically in the best oriental tradition.
I imagine that this propensity for singing is a traditional national characteristic. It is a characteristic which the government has exploited as a potent device for instilling love and loyalty towards the leader in the hearts of the people.

The Korean public has no access to the popular music of the outside world. When Koreans purchase a radio, they have to take it to a special place to be adjusted so that the dial cannot be tuned to switch stations. It is not only forbidden to listen to anything other than state radio. It is rendered a practical impossibility. As for foreign records and tapes, like foreign books and magazines, they are not even available in the dollar shops.

The only music Koreans get to listen to is traditional folk songs, which are still popular. These might be described as their secular music, although quite a few of them have been given new words to make them ideologically sound. Then there is the sacred music, the Juche-oriented revolutionary music, the compositions of the past forty years, stylistically in the Korean folk tradition but heavy in ideological content. About three-quarters of the songs are paeans of praise to the leader or his son. For example, *The Song of General Kim Il Sung*, the immortal revolutionary paean, and *Long Life and Good Health to the Leader* are widely sung among our people. These are successful compositions which give artistic expression to the fervent loyalty of the entire people.

‘In addition, there are *The Leader’s Noble Idea Flowers Out*, *We Sing of His Benevolent Love*, *This Happiness of Having the Leader* and many other excellent compositions which celebrate the happiness of our people under the paternal care of our leader and enrich the cultural life of the people.’ (*Korean Review*, p. 175)

Recent hits include *The Leader Comes to our Farm*, a song about a presidential visit to a co-operative farm on one of his tours of giving on-the-spot guidance, and a catchy number with a slight rock feel to it that contains the lyrics, ‘I’m longing for you, Dear Leader, I’m longing for you, honour to you, dear Kim Jong Il’.

The salient characteristic of these songs is that they are composed in the folk tradition for the primary purpose of being sung by people as
opposed to being performed by professional entertainers. Every time the people in North Korea give vent to their emotions in song, as they frequently do, they reinforce in themselves the state ideology.

On September 9th we not only had a picnic during the day. In the evening the Government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea requested the pleasure of our company at a banquet on the occasion of the 34th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the People’s Palace of Culture. It was probably by international standards a modest affair and we revisers were assigned to the bottom tables. Still, it is not every day that a provincial social worker from Leeds gets to mingle with ministers, generals and ambassadors and be waited upon by an army of monkey-suited flunkeys. It was a pity about the food. People assure me that Korean food is not the worst in the world, that Japanese food is far worse, but I find it a bit hard to believe.

On October 10th, the anniversary of the founding of the party, we were taken before having our picnic to the funfair at Mount Taesong. Situated a few kilometres to the east of the city, in ancient times this picturesque mountain served the citizens of Pyongyang as a natural fortress to which they could retreat in times of peril. Some of the fortifications they built are still standing. Today it has been developed as an alternative recreation centre to historic Mangyondae. The Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery, where the busts of the departed heroes, who took part in the armed guerrilla struggle against the Japanese, watch over the city in the plains below, has been established there. It also contains the national zoo, the botanical gardens, and a funfair.

My most vivid recollection of that outing is of the reaction of the female domestics from the Ansan Chodasso who came with us. Although they looked like adolescents, they were young women in their early twenties. Nearly all young adults in North Korea look young for their years. A friend of mine had the theory that this is a side-effect of virginity. At the funfair, Kum Sung and Myong Ok, A Ok and Sun Il, were enraptured like small children.

‘I can’t believe this’, I said to Sami. ‘Look at the expressions on their faces.’
‘You have yet to understand,’ he explained to me, ‘these people lead such simple lives.’

One Sunday morning shortly after my arrival I went for a walk with Simone on Moran Hill, an attractive area of parkland in central Pyongyang, Pyongyang’s equivalent to Hyde Park. Simone was telling me why she loved North Korea. She said it was above all because of the people. ‘Constantly I am fascinated by them. I feel almost maternal towards them. They are such delightfully simple people. I do not mean simple in the sense that they are stupid. They are very far from being stupid. I mean it in the sense of Gauguin’s South Sea islanders. They are unspoiled.’

A few weeks later I found myself in need of medical attention. There were always two translators from the publishing house in residence among us at the Ansan Chodasso to distribute the texts, arrange transport for us, and generally be of assistance. Neither of the two who were in residence during my first few months spoke English. One of them spoke French, the other Spanish. I had therefore to enlist Jean-Jacques’ assistance to act as an interpreter for me. As soon as he heard that I was in pain, the Korean’s face became a picture of alarm. He seized the telephone and began making frantic arrangements for me to be transported to the Foreigners’ Hospital at once. I felt somewhat embarrassed by his reaction. I asked Jean-Jacques to tell the chap to calm down, to tell him that I did want to see a doctor as soon as it was convenient but I was not an emergency, I was not about to expire. ‘No,’ said Jean-Jacques, ‘I know these people. They cannot understand such subtle distinctions. For them if something is not absolutely urgent, then it can wait all day. They are a very simple people.’
On my third full day in Korea, I was set to work. Originally the translators worked side by side with the reviser. They passed the reviser their translations as they went along. At the end of the day they would discuss the corrections. By the time I arrived they had settled on their present system. The translators send their texts to the Ansan Chodasso. The reviser does his work in his apartment. From time to time he is taken to the publishing house for a discussion, primarily to ensure that the revised version has not strayed too far from the Korean original.

The pattern for most language sections is that there are two revisers. One concentrates on revising the President’s *Collected Works*. In most languages they are now up to his speeches for 1980. The other reviser works on the periodicals they put out and sundry other works. In the English section, it was Michael who worked on the sacred texts while I did the propaganda. I had some qualms about this, about being involved in something I did not particularly approve of. I soon lost them when I saw that their propaganda was so stupid that hardly anyone was ever likely to read it and no-one could possibly take it seriously. The only valid contribution I was making to the country was helping the translators improve the standard of their English. It had been some years since the publishing house had had the luxury of two revisers for the English language. At first the quality of the translations I was presented with was not good. It was not so often that I was given something unintelligible to revise, but always the grammar was inaccurate and use of idiom inappropriate, while all the sentences were long and rambling.

To be fair to the translators, they had a very difficult job. It is much easier to translate from a foreign language into one’s native tongue than to do it the other way round. None of the translators had had the chance to live and study in English-speaking countries except for a few young ones who had studied in places like Zambia and Tanzania. They seldom had the opportunity to converse with an English speaker. They seldom had the opportunity to see an English language film.
They did not have a great deal of access to books and periodicals in English. They did have some, but they were more likely to see a copy of *Moscow News* than *Newsweek*. In the circumstances their translations were not contemptible, and it seemed to me that in the time I was there they effected a vast improvement in their standard of translation by studying the amendments I made each week. By the time I left they were writing English sentences instead of Korean sentences with English words, although obviously they still made mistakes and there were some aspects of the language they could not master, e.g., when to insert and omit the definite and indefinite articles.

My staple fare was revising the three English language periodicals: the weekly newspaper, the *Pyongyang Times*; the monthly magazine, *Korea Today*; and a glossy pictorial magazine simply called *Korea*.

The *Pyongyang Times* is an eight-page tabloid that comes out every Saturday and is distributed around hotel lobbies and other public places frequented by foreigners. The bulk of the paper comprises articles translated from the national daily paper and organ of the Workers’ Party of Korea, *Rodong Sinmun*. The *Pyongyang Times* also follows the same format as *Rodong Sinmun*, which has six pages of what purports to be news. The first four pages deal with domestic matters, i.e., brilliant successes in agriculture and industry. The leading article on the first page is invariably along the lines of ‘Great Leader President Kim Il Sung receives special envoy of *cpu* General Secretary’, or ‘New Hungarian Ambassador Presents Credentials to President Kim Il Sung’, or ‘Great Leader President Kim Il Sung Receives Syrian Government Military Delegation’. Page five is devoted to the heroic struggle of the working people and students of South Korea against the us imperialism and the puppet fascist military dictatorship regime. South Korea is always south Korea with a small ‘s’, as it is not recognised as a separate country. It is the southern half of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, currently under occupation by the forces of us imperialism. The back page is devoted to ‘foreign news’, not the real news of major events in the outside world, but reports on the great economic achievements of other socialist countries and fellow members of the Association of
Non-Aligned States. References to the other socialist countries except Cuba become relatively scarce after January 1988, when only Cuba met North Korean expectations that they would all boycott the Seoul Olympic Games in protest against the South Korean government’s refusal to agree to Pyongyang co-hosting the games except for a handful of minor events.

The front page of the *Pyongyang Times* is devoted to the President and always carries a picture of him with the week’s most important foreign delegation. The next four pages record the brilliant successes in the technical, ideological and cultural revolutions, none of which would have been possible without the wise guidance of the Great Leader or Dear Comrade Kim Jong Il, whether it be the construction of the West Sea Barrage or the cultivation of the Pyongyang variety of thick-headed spring cabbage. The back page used to correspond to the back page of *Rodong Sinmun*. Cuba has opened a new sugar mill. Congratulations on their forty-fourth anniversary of independence to the people of Lebanon, where ‘a great deal of effort is going into achieving national amity and unity’. In the last months I was in Pyongyang, however, the anti-South Korean propaganda was increasingly spilling over from pages six and seven onto page eight.

Those poor South Korean people. Even as the revolution and construction advance vigorously and energetically towards the complete victory of socialism in the northern half of the Republic, where the broad masses of the people are rallied closely around the Great Leader President Kim Il Sung under the banner of the Workers’ Party of Korea, the compatriots in the South are tyrannised by the US imperialists and the Chun Doo Tae Woo puppet clique and have to toil from twelve to sixteen hours a day for subsistence wages. At least the minority of the population who are fortunate enough to have a job do. According to the *Pyongyang Times*, unemployment in South Korea is running at over 50%, this in spite of the fact that the South Korean puppet army is a million strong, and there are a further quarter of a million in the police force, not to mention a vast network of paid spies and informers. As if the mass unemployment, starvation wages and brutal suppression were not enough to cope with, there is also the pollution and disease.
On 21st November 1987, the *Pyongyang Times* carried a photograph of two men carrying cameras and wearing gas-masks. The caption read, ‘Reporters are obliged to wear gas-masks for news coverage in pollution-ridden Seoul.’ It evidently did not occur to the editorial board that the presence of riot police in the same photograph might suggest to the reader a different explanation for the gas-masks.

It is reported in the same issue that 57.6% of the South Korean population are infected with the tuberculosis virus, ‘that the number of hepatitis patients totalled 4.5 million’ and ‘there are 27,000 lepers’. Then there is the skin gangrene caused by eating pollution-infected fish, and, of course, AIDS.

Reporting an AIDS epidemic in South Korea, the *Pyongyang Times* for September 12th 1987 stated that this is more than just attributable to the presence of the GIs. The US government actually posts AIDS-infected GIs to South Korea as a deliberate policy. ‘The aim of dispatching AIDS carriers from the US is to enable the transmission and effects of the AIDS virus to be studied experimentally using Korean people as guinea pigs.’

It is difficult to comprehend the mentality that could be responsible for publishing such rubbish. It is one thing to tell such grotesque fairy stories to your own people to reinforce their sense of their own well being. Even that policy is fraught with long-term dangers if the authorities are still serious about wanting peaceful reunification of the country. The working masses are going to be pretty confused if they ever have to find out the truth about living standards in the South if these are the notions they are fed. It is another thing to direct this nonsense at the outside world.

What makes it even more ridiculous is that they do have plenty of legitimate ammunition with which to launch a propaganda assault on the South Korean rulers and the Americans. South Korea has had an atrocious record on human rights. The degree of autonomy that the South Korean government has been able to exercise is very much open to question. For a start, it is the American general commanding the US forces stationed in South Korea who has supreme command over the local army. It was noticeable that in the summer of 1987, Chun Doo
Hwan did a complete volte-face about staging pre-Olympic elections and restoring the prominent opposition leaders, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam, their liberty after ‘consultation’ with a US special envoy. There clearly has been considerable popular discontent with the government in the South. It is known that Roh Tae Woo’s Democratic Justice Party resorted to fraudulent practices in the December 1987 presidential elections. The military threat from backward North Korea cannot justify the proliferation of 1,000 nuclear warheads in South Korea.

Even when the North Korean journalists do address themselves to these issues, they invalidate their arguments by their exaggeration, tone of hysteria and incoherence.

Their stupidity cannot be excused on the grounds that they lack an adequate model for making external propaganda. In Japan there is a sizeable Korean expatriate community. Many of them either support the North or have to say they do if they want to be allowed to visit their relatives in the homeland. They have an organisation called Chongryon, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. Each week Chongryon publishes an English language newspaper, the People’s Korea. This newspaper manages to put over the North’s case reasonably persuasively. It does not rely on wild lies and exaggerations. It also has the sense to play down the presidential personality cult. The Koreans would do better to abandon the Pyongyang Times, save on printer’s ink and paper, give the translators some useful alternative employment, and distribute the People’s Korea instead.

The monthly magazines, which I was told are distributed abroad as well as internally, are marginally more sober in their content, but still hopeless. The level of propaganda is too naïve and the standard of writing too low.

Most of the other assignments I was given to revise were equally futile. I revised essays on economics and philosophy from the Academy of Juche Studies which would not have been considered undergraduate standard in the West. I revised the Korean Review, an encyclopædic introduction to all aspects of life in the DPRK, political, economic and cultural, which to be fair was quite informative. I also revised several books of anecdotes
illustrating the infinite wisdom and love for the people of the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung. They are like books of stories about Jesus that European children might be given to read in primary school. They are immensely popular with Koreans of all ages. It is symptomatic of how remote the North Koreans are from the realities of the outside world that presumably quite senior officials in the publishing house have deemed them appropriate for translation into other languages, oblivious to the fact that if they are read at all it will be with derision. There is a whole series of them under the generic title *The Peerless Great Man*. There was also a long one purportedly written by a high government official which nearly drove me to distraction. It was called *Anecdotes from the Great History*. I came to refer to it as *Forty Tons of Anecdotes* because that was what it felt like to me.

The Kim Il Sung personality cult is designed to serve a dual purpose. Obviously it aims at binding the hearts of the people to their leader to obtain their unquestioning loyalty and obedience and unite them in a common faith. The quasi-religious element has been explicitly acknowledged. Kim Jong Il is quoted in the April 1988 edition of *Korea Today* as having said, ‘The cult of man by man is not just a simple sentiment.

‘In our society the worship and adoration of a great man by millions of people does not emanate from any moral sense of duty or any logical thinking. If they do, they can never be true and firm.

‘In short, the most sincere and firm veneration and worship are formed only by complete fascination for his personality.’

The other purpose of the cult is to present the people with an ideal of humanity which they must not only revere but try and emulate in their own humble lives. Here is half an ounce from the *Forty Tons of Anecdotes* in which the President embodies the revolutionary virtue of frugality and displays his innate egalitarianism.

‘The officials who worked for the Great Leader wanted to have new winter clothes made for him and revealed their intention to him.

‘The clothes he usually wore on his on-the-spot guidance tours were somewhat discoloured and it was getting cold.
‘After listening to them the Great Leader said: “The clothes I wear now are perfectly adequate. Why should I need a new suit? Although a bit discoloured the ones I have will do, if they are remade, turning them inside out. They are good to wear when visiting factories in winter. I should like to have these clothes mended rather than have a new suit made.”

‘At this the Great Leader admonished them:

“Are you going to make a king of me? You always want me to be given special treatment and you suppose it is for my own good. This will not do. Is it the proper way to go among the people wearing fine clothes? If I am dressed differently from them, the workers and peasants will not be as free and open with me.

“We should always share sweet and bitter with the people. Our daily life must be frugal. We must make a habit of saving and sparing everything. Only then can we improve the economic life of the country and the people’s livelihood.”

‘He had spoken in such earnest that the functionary had brought his clothes to have them mended.

‘I bowed before the outstanding modesty of the Great Leader who wanted to have his plain clothes mended, the winter clothes he had put on for years when leaving for his tours of on-the-spot guidance.

‘There were several subsequent occasions when the Great Leader sent us his clothes to have them mended. Such frugality in life was one of his noble popular qualities.’

Here is another extract from the Anecdotes. This one illustrates the correct emotional orientation that the subject should have towards his leader and the leader’s warm benevolence. Remember that the narrator is a very high-ranking government official.

‘The Great Leader bestowed on me, a soldier who had done his duty, more praise than I deserved.

‘The Great Leader looked at me standing there overcome with emotion.

‘He said with a smile:

“You have worked faithfully for us for over 30 years. Let’s have a
souvenir photograph taken in front of ginkgo tree in honour of this memorable day.”

‘Thus I sat for a photograph with the Great Leader before a ginkgo tree tinted with autumnal foliage. I cannot remember how the moments passed and when the shutters clicked.

‘I merely felt my whole body burning and my heart beating high beyond control. The vast blue sky over the motherland, every blade of grass and tree in the garden, nay, all the world seemed to be rejoicing over the great honour bestowed upon me. The memory of that day excites me even today.

‘After having had a photo taken, I expressed my inner thoughts to him with a deep bow of thanks:

“Great Leader, I have so far caused you only anxiety. I have done nothing much to speak of.

“Nevertheless, on this memorable day you deigned to invite me like this and sit for a photo with me. I cannot find words to express my thanks for this honour and happiness. I will be faithful to you and dear Comrade Kim Jong Il to the end of my life. I wish you a long life in good health.”

“Thank you, thank you”, the Great Leader said, beaming at me, his hand placed affectionately upon my shoulder.’

Many of the stories in this book and in The Peerless Great Man series have as their setting the President’s legendary tours for giving on-the-spot guidance. It is one of the appealing idiosyncrasies of Kim Il Sung, the man that is as opposed to the myth, that he has a most meticulous concern for the minutiae of his people’s daily lives.

Much of his presidential career has been occupied with touring the country, inspecting towns and villages, factories and farms, houses and schools, delivering instructions and advice. Wherever he goes plaques are erected to mark the occasion and the date. There is a plaque in the Pyongyang Department Store. There is one in the maternity hospital. On the first floor of the publishing house there is a plaque to commemorate a visit by Kim Jong Il, who is emulating the paternal model. Kim Il Sung was once asked when he found time to deal with affairs of state when he
spent so much time on his on-the-spot guidance tours. He replied that these were affairs of state.

In the mythology the Korean people come across as a pretty witless bunch who would have struggled along under Japanese rule for ever had the Great Leader not come along to lead them out of captivity. He then had to teach these stupid ex-colonial slaves everything they know. The legends are full of instances of his having to point out the most banal errors to bewildered officials. It is fortunate for the Korean people that he is not the only man among them with a brain. His son has one too. So when their father leader finally shuffles off his mortal coil, his son will remain to do all their thinking for them. Already it is Kim Jong Il who has taken on most of the task of roaming the land putting things to rights while his father stays in his palace to receive the homage of envoys from abroad. Here is an extract from the Anecdotes in which the Dear Leader is giving on-the-spot guidance to the officials in charge of the International Friendship Exhibition at Mount Myohyant.

The International Friendship Exhibition is a curious institution. It has been an established ritual for many years that official visitors to the DPRK are expected to present the Great Leader, and latterly the Dear Leader also, with a gift as a token of friendship and esteem. According to the Korean Review, the president has now received over 28,000 valuable gifts from ‘heads of state, parties, governments, revolutionary organisations and people from all walks of life in 146 countries’. Some years ago the Exhibition was specially built to put the gifts on public display as an enduring testimony to ‘the profound respect and reverence held by the revolutionary peoples of the world for the Great Leader President Kim Il Sung’. (Korean Review, p. 213)

‘Thereupon he told them in detail how to run the Exhibition in a well organised fashion.

‘Dear Comrade Kim Jong Il looked round all the display rooms. He said that all the visitors should be made to wear overshoes in the future and went on:

“In the interior of the International Friendship Exhibition overshoes
should be worn without fail. This will inspire in the visitor due feelings of solemnity and prevent the carpets from being soiled […].

“In the Exhibition not only our people but foreigners except for heads of state should be made to wear overshoes.”

‘At that moment we blushed, conscience-stricken. Although entrusted with the important duty of the permanent preservation of precious national treasures, we had failed to think deeply enough about how to manage them more carefully.’

Of course there are some bureaucrats who simply will not be told. At one point in the Anecdotes we hear the president commenting, ‘I told our officials, I rang them up, time and again, not to let the mineral waters flow away uselessly but supply them to the people. However, they didn’t do it. If they made a small investment, they could by bottling it sell it on the train and in the shops but they don’t.’

It is always a good idea to incorporate a few rascally officials into the mythology. Then when things are not right in people’s reality, they can know whom to blame and sigh, ‘If only the Tsar knew.’

Kim Jong Il incidentally does not have to rest content with having his exploits recorded as marginalia in books about his father. There are whole books of anecdotes about his virtue and sagacity too, of which The People’s Leader, Volumes One and Two has already been translated into English. There are also books of legends about the immortal woman revolutionary and mother of Korea, the cute Kim Jong Suk, the president’s first wife and Kim Jong Il’s mother, who died in 1949.

For a week or two I found my insane little job quite diverting, a pleasant respite from the pressures of social work in the inner city. After that, my work too became part of my nightmare. Most of the other revisers liked their job but I found sitting at a desk day in, day out, simply too boring for words. I ached to be behind the wheel of a car again, to drive down mean streets and experience strange and wonderful people.

Like everything else for me those first few weeks in Pyongyang, the social side of life had its novelty value. It was clear from the start that there was not going to be a wide range of entertainment on offer.
If my working life was dull beyond belief, my leisure hours were not much better. Pyongyang is a fascinating place to visit, but for the average foreigner it is an insufferable place to live. The majority of foreign residents in Pyongyang feel as if they are living on another planet, not just in another country.

By deliberate policy, the foreigner in Pyongyang is cut off from the life of the people. There are definite indications that the barriers against informal contact between foreigners and Koreans are in the process of being lowered, but as yet one can do little more than look over the top and say hello. The Koreans are not allowed to invite foreigners into their homes. They are only supposed to call upon foreigners if they have some specific business with them.

Previously Koreans were not allowed to meet foreigners informally in public places. This rule has recently been relaxed but there are not so many public places to meet. The Koreans are not allowed into the foreigners’ hotels except on business. Apart from the restaurants, which they can only afford to visit occasionally, there are few public places for Koreans to socialise with each other, let alone with foreigners. When Michael first arrived in Pyongyang the interpreters who were accompanying businessmen or delegations in the hotels were wary of conversing with any foreigner they were not officially with. By the time I arrived, they had been given the green light to associate freely with anyone who happened to be in the hotel at the same time, but it was still against the rules for them to go to the hotels except when they had official business there. One might strike up an acquaintance with a Korean and see him every night for a week. Then he would disappear from view for a few months until he was assigned to another delegation.

When one did come into social contact with Koreans, relations of friendship were inevitably stunted because they are not at liberty to speak freely and openly about their lives. They tend to be reluctant to divulge the most innocuous information about the realities of their daily lives.
In the course of my year at the Ansan Chodasso there were two English-speaking interpreters who resided at the guest house for a few months. They were both extremely nice people and I became fond of them. However, it was impossible for friendship to develop beyond a superficial level as they were under the constant obligation to play the diplomat. I expect that it was on the basis of their ability to do this that the publishing house had selected them for a spell of protracted exposure to foreigners. The foreigners who learned the language did not necessarily get any closer to the people. The people still mouthed propaganda at them.

Even if we foreigners had not been excluded from it, in North Korea there was not much of what the rest of us call life in which to participate. For the majority of people in the real world the essential core of life is private life with family and friends. Whether we regard our work as totally alienating or deeply rewarding, we still tend to regard it primarily as a means to an end, earning our living. Ask a North Korean what his life is all about and he will most likely tell you that he is building the revolution and construction. On one level he would just be making propaganda and he knows it. But if in the event of catching him in a rare unguarded moment, you were able to press him and say, ‘Don’t just make propaganda, tell me the truth’, he would probably think for a minute and then tell you, ‘I am building the revolution and construction’. This is partly because when the cultural environment consists entirely of propaganda, the distinction in the mind between propaganda and reality becomes obscured. It is also because life in North Korea consists of little else. There is practically nothing except the home and the workplace. In the communist ideology an individual’s private family life may be important and necessary but it is of secondary importance to his public life as a worker and member of the collective. Nowhere has there been a more concerted effort to translate this ideology into reality than in North Korea.

I could never find out exact details, but North Koreans spend an inordinate amount of time at their workplaces. The official working week is supposed to be forty-eight hours but this is condensed into five days, not six. On Saturdays they must attend the workplace for education, primarily of a political and ideological nature. Most factories
and enterprises in urban areas also have responsibility for the cultivation of an acre of farmland.* The publishing house, for example, has a nine-acre farm outside Pyongyang. It is said that the Director General himself has to take a turn in the fields occasionally. I am unable to say whether time spent in the fields is included in the basic working week, or if it is a ‘voluntary’ extra.

The workplace is also the setting for occasional organised social activities and for part-time study. Everyone is encouraged to study while working and a great many people do. At the Ryongsong Machine Factory in Hamhung, one of the country’s key industrial institutions, approximately half the technical personnel have qualified while working at the factory as opposed to graduating from university. The president has said that the ideal Juche revolutionary works eight hours a day, studies eight hours a day, and rests eight hours a day. I was variously told that workers are entitled to one or two weeks’ annual holiday. There are national holidays, May Day for example, but the workers normally have to then work Sunday instead to compensate.

Outside the workplace there are hardly any outlets for social activities, even in urban areas. There are theatres and cinemas in Pyongyang but these hold limited attraction. Except on special occasions like the Spring Arts Festival, nothing from the outside world is ever shown in them. North Korea does not produce many new films and plays and in any case these are all shown on tv. There is the Pyongyang circus. Soccer and ice hockey matches are played in empty stadiums and rinks and later shown on tv.

People in North Korea really are too busy building the revolution and construction to have time for anything other than an hour or two’s television before bed.

Foreigners are at liberty to enter the small number of restaurants and even smaller number of bars for the locals, but if they do not speak Korean they will need to be accompanied by an interpreter. They will also need to accept being stared at the whole time.

* The workers are transported to the fields as and when required.
Realistically the only social outlets for the foreigners were a few joint venture restaurants, predominantly Japanese, which only the privileged locals could afford because they did not accept local currency, the International Club and the hotels for foreign guests. All these establishments had one thing in common. They were all largely deserted most of the time.

The International Club and the three oldest hotels, the Haebangsan Hotel, the Taedonggang Hotel and the Pyongyang Hotel, were all clustered in the vicinity of the Taedong Bridge. I seldom frequented any of these places. The International Club offered a bar, a restaurant, a pool room and other facilities, and for the DPRK unusually efficient staff, but it was not much used. I only ever went to the Haebangsan Hotel once. Many of the foreign students who were based in the provinces stayed there during their vacations. The least affluent of the Koreans from Japan stayed there when visiting the homeland. It felt more like a hostel than a hotel. The Taedonggang was the first hotel to be built after the war. A modest, three-storied affair with a granite façade, it was now a pretty shabby-looking hotel but it did have a pleasant coffee shop which was a popular meeting place for the younger Koreans from Japan, both the visitors and the ones who had taken the fateful plunge and repatriated.

Koreans who repatriate from Japan are allowed to bring with them all their savings and their possessions, including their car, from the capitalist world. They invariably live to regret it. Japanese cars do not run for ever. Spare parts have to be ordered from Hong Kong. Initially they are able to maintain a semblance of their accustomed lifestyle. They can go to the Taedonggang and drink Suntory brandy. They can take their yen to the dollar shops to buy life’s little luxuries. The years go by. Their savings evaporate. Economic conditions in the country do not alter. Eventually they end up with the same abominably dreary lifestyle as all the other inhabitants except that they have the fatal memory of something better. The Pyongyang Hotel, an ugly, characterless building both inside and out, superseded the Taegongang as Pyongyang’s leading hotel. I was told that it had quite a few guests sometimes but on the odd occasion that
I went there, these were few customers in the bar. This may have been partly due to a chubby barmaid who seemed to regard serving customers as an unwarranted intrusion on her leisure time.

Nearer to where I lived were the Changgwangsan Hotel and the Koryo Hotel. The Changgwangsan contained on the ground floor a prohibitively expensive coffee shop, over two dollars for a bottle of Japanese beer, more than double the price elsewhere in Pyongyang, and on the 18th floor and the DPRK’s premier, in fact its only active night-spot, a discothèque which was known on occasion to hold as many as two or three hundred people. Elegant, twin-towered, forty-six storeys high, complete with rooftop revolving restaurant* the Koryo Hotel, completed in 1985, is Pyongyang’s one hotel of international class, the rest being at best of average tourist standard. The Koryo and the country’s other luxury hotel, the Myohyangsan at Mount Myohyant, are remarkable for not containing enormous pictures of the leader in the entrance hall. This fact and the fact that they exist at all are symptomatic of Pyongyang’s tentative leaning towards a more open door policy and a willingness to compromise a little with the outside world.

Nearest to home were the Potanggang Hotel, which I adopted as my local, and the Ansan Club, a motel-type complex where guests were assigned little bungalows instead of rooms or suites. The Ansan Club contained a good dollar shop and Korean and Japanese restaurants which were very popular with the local people who had some red won to spend. For a brief period in 1984 it was the scene of a legendary social experiment. Although it seems improbable that the authorities in the DPRK, where it is considered indecent for a woman to wear her skirt above knee length, could ever sanction such a thing, I heard from sufficient sources to give it credence that for a few months there were professional ladies available for hire in the Ansan Club at a hundred dollars a time. The rumours conflict as to whether the girls were imported from Thailand or the Philippines. One thing is for certain. They were not Korean. Nobody knew why the experiment folded. It may have been because the prices were too high to

* Never actually open while I was there.
attract enough business. Or it may have been that the girls were unable
to cope with the life – or lack of it – in Pyongyang.

There seem to be two reasons why all these places are so dead, except
for brief explosions of social activity when Pyongyang plays host to a
big international convention or parties of Eastern European tourists.
The first reason is that there are precious few foreigners living in this
city with an official population of two million, the capital of a nation of
twenty million people. The second reason is that many of the foreigners
who do live in Pyongyang are overcome by apathy and fail to make an
effort. A Latin American diplomat once complained to me that in other
cities to which he had been posted, there used to be a lot of informal
socialising within the diplomatic community, but in Pyongyang there
was nothing but protocol. An Ethiopian visitor could not believe the
depression and despondency he had encountered among the residents at
his embassy. He recalled how, living in war-torn Kabul, there had been a
thriving social life among the expatriate community with people holding
regular parties in their homes. Perhaps it is the absence of life as the rest
of the world knows it, coupled with the total estrangement from life as
the Koreans know it, that breeds the apathy and negativism that most
foreigners who are condemned to live in Pyongyang for any length of
time succumb to.

Although there are now more foreigners to be seen in Pyongyang than
there have been for years, the foreigner is still a sufficiently rare species
that is it impossible to walk anywhere without being stared at the whole
time. I was told by a Soviet diplomat in April 1988 that there were only
about 700 Soviet technicians in the whole country. Only a minority of
these are resident in Pyongyang.

There was a tiny foreign business community in the city. I met one
Yugoslav businessman who was living in the Potanggang Hotel. Simone
was friendly with a Polish couple who were something to do with
shipping.

There was a handful of foreigners teaching in the universities,
including one American teaching English as a foreign language.

There was our little community of revisers.
During the time I was there, there was a colony of West German engineers living in the Koryo Hotel. They had come to North Korea to build a new cement factory. To a man they hated being there. Every night they gathered in the basement bar of the Koryo to try and keep their spirits afloat with copious quantities of beer and champagne.

There were a small number of foreign students studying in North Korea. To help maintain their political and economic ties, the USSR and other Eastern European countries assign a small number of students to study Korean, most of whom spent a year or two in Pyongyang mastering the language. Holmer had spent two years as a student in Pyongyang. Quite a few of the Eastern European diplomats in Pyongyang had first come to Korea as students. There was a representation of students from China and Syria, a country which maintains strong ties with the DPRK. Most auspicious on the social scene were the Africans. There were contingents from Guinea and a couple of other Francophone West African countries. There were English-speaking contingents from Lesotho, Zambia, Tanzania and Ethiopia. Student exchanges between the DPRK and Africa had begun in 1982 in the interests of international friendship and South–South co-operation. The experiment had not been much of a success and no new African students were arriving.

Some of the students were studying at universities in Pyongyang. Some were studying medicine in the northern industrial city of Hamhung. More were studying agronomy in the east coast port city of Wonsan. Those based in Hamhung and Wonsan all used to look forward to coming up to Pyongyang for their vacations, two weeks at Christmas, six in the summer – they were allowed longer holidays than the Korean students. Pyongyang may not have much to offer but in the provinces, there is nothing. All the African students were male. There had briefly been some female students as well, but their liberal ways had so alarmed the locals that they had had to be recalled.

Whenever I felt that the emptiness of life in Pyongyang was more than I could bear, I used to remind myself of Sujar and John, Lazaro and Giland, and how much more they had had to cope with and for how much longer. I doubt if the average Soviet dissident exiled to Siberia
for a few years suffers more at the hands of his government than these
good-natured, fun-loving young men who had had to sacrifice some of
the best years of their lives in the interests of promoting international
friendship. None of the ones I talked to had the faintest idea of what
they were letting themselves in for when they volunteered to go to Korea.
Most of them were serving five-year sentences studying agronomy or
engineering. Those studying medicine at Hamhung were condemned
to seven years, but most of these had the compensation that they were
getting the chance to qualify as doctors in Korea when they had not been
able to gain admission to medical school in their own country.

They had all had to spend their first year learning Korean before
embarking on their courses proper. To learn Korean in one year is a tough
assignment. They had all become fluent in conversation, but not all of
them were able to follow their lectures easily and many had to plough
through their textbooks with constant reference to the dictionary.

Most of them felt that on the whole the quality of the education they
were receiving was reasonable, although no better than they could have
received at home.* The agronomists complained that all the Koreans
knew how to cultivate was rice and maize. They certainly would not have
learned anything useful about animal husbandry. DPRK propaganda
is full of references to modern, mechanised duck plants, pig plants
and chicken plants. The Koreans will not be told that in English one
cannot use the term plant in this way. They reject the word farm as too
antiquated to reflected their advanced techniques of breeding animals on
a mass scale. The reality is that the meat supply is abysmal. North Koreans
eat meat on gala occasions like the president’s birthday. Otherwise they
are lucky if they get sufficient meat now and again to flavour their soup.

The Africans were not too dissatisfied with the quality of their Korean
education, but they were aware that it would count for little in terms
of prestige when they got home. Moreover, they had to put in long
hours to earn that qualification. They may have been granted longer

* Some of them criticised the teaching method which consisted to a large extent of
learning by rote.
holidays than their Korean classmates, but vacations were still minimal by international standards and they had to attend classes six days a week. Because of financial constraints and the distance involved, the most they could hope for was to spend one summer at home in a five-year stint. In other years the only breath of freedom they enjoyed was a week or two in Beijing or Hong Kong.

Money was tight for them. Although well-off by local standards, their allowance when converted into blue won was such that a night out meant nursing a couple of small cans of beer. One thing they all agreed upon, however, was that no matter how bad life was in North Korea now, it was infinitely better than when they first arrived. There had been no Koryo Hotel then, no Changgwansan disco. There was not even a proper bar then in the whole of Pyongyang, and there were far fewer foreigners passing through to meet. They had had to report to the college authorities whenever they went in or out and, they assured me, they really had been followed everywhere they went. These practices had only ceased after they made protestations through their embassies.

The one thing that really got these chaps down, though, was not the monotony of life, the hard work, the lack of cash, the surveillance or the homesickness. It was the lack of sexual opportunity. North Korean girls are not readily seducible. The prevailing moral code is chastity before marriage. There is compelling social pressure on the female to preserve her purity for her future husband. The society is also nationalistic almost to the point of xenophobia. To have sex out of wedlock is very bad. To have sex with a foreigner is unspeakable. Although the foreign students had the advantages of speaking the language and being able to communicate and to make informal contacts at college, the psychological barriers they had to break down were immense. They then encountered the further problem in such a closely supervised society of lack of privacy and opportunity. In the foreign students’ hotels lived Korean guides who were there ostensibly to assist them, but also to keep a careful eye on them. Many of the female students would be living at home with their parents or, if they lived in a students’ hostel, they would be sharing rooms.
As one African explained to me, the only chance you get is late at night and then you end up doing it in a bush.

Contraception is another practical problem. North Korea is not a place where you can walk into a chemist’s and pick up a packet of Durex from the counter. I am told that married women are routinely given contraceptive injections at the clinics, a method of contraception deemed far too medically damaging for normal use in developed countries.

Some students did register the occasional success. A Zambian friend told me that he had managed two relationships with local girls during his five years. The first relationship ended abruptly when the girl made a sudden disappearance from the campus. He tried to find out what had happened to her but nobody would say anything. His conclusion was that their relationship had been discovered and his girl friend had been executed. From my observation of the society, I personally think it far more likely that she had been deemed unworthy of higher education on account of her moral weakness and been packed off to a construction site to push wheelbarrows for the rest of her life. Having said that, my friend was an intelligent young man who had lived in the country for five years, and I later met another African who postulated the same fate for a girl he had been associating with who made a sudden and mysterious disappearance.

The only other significant group of foreign residents in the DPRK are the diplomats.* However, many countries which maintain formal links with North Korea do not maintain an embassy in Pyongyang. Instead, their ambassador in Beijing doubles as ambassador to Pyongyang, making only the occasional visit on business or for a special occasion like the president’s birthday. Of the diplomats who do reside in Pyongyang, one does not see so much. The Russians are numerous enough to create their own little social microcosm in the embassy. There is even a special satellite to beam Soviet TV programmes to the embassy. There are

* The DPRK is recognised by all the communist countries, most of the developing countries, and among advanced capitalist countries by the Scandinavian nations and Austria.
diplomats from poorer third-world countries whose social activities are curtailed because they only have blue won. Many are invisible because they have simply given up a life in Pyongyang and have adopted a policy of waiting out time. An Asian diplomat told me that his country allowed diplomats to take emergency home leave twice in their career, and everyone who came to Pyongyang found some pretext to use up one of their options.

Without access to the local community and with such a small and incohesive expatriate alternative, one largely relied on foreign transients for social stimulus and interest. As well as the Koreans visiting the homeland from Japan, there is a steady stream of tourists passing through from the socialist countries during the summer months. Then there are scientists and technicians whose visits have usually been arranged by the United Nations Development Project. There are even people coming over to try and do business. Theirs can be a frustrating undertaking. As one young businessman from Hong Kong explained to me, ‘We’ve been here seven times this year trying to do a deal. The trouble with these people is they’ve got no money. They never will have any money unless they modernise their industry. If they don’t buy our equipment, they can’t modernise. They ask for more and more discount and we can’t give them any more. We waste hours and hours going round in circles. As soon as you think you’ve got somewhere, the guy says he has to go and consult somebody else before he can make a decision. Now we’ll probably have to raise the price because the dollar’s fallen. These people are just so stupid.’

The only time any of the hotels actually becomes crowded, however, is when Pyongyang is playing host to an international conference. During the first few months I was there, Pyongyang was the venue in quick succession for the first film festival of non-aligned countries, a World Health Organisation regional conference, a conference for denuclearisation in the Pacific region, and the annual conference of the World Federation of Democratic Youth, among others. It was possible to park oneself at one of the bars in the Potanggang or the Koryo with
a reasonable expectation that one would fall in with interesting people from all corners of the globe, all of whom, whether they came from Sweden or Venezuela, from Indonesia or from Ethiopia, were, if they were going to talk to each other, going to have to do so in English.

The opportunity to meet a diversity of interesting people from different countries, different societies and different walks of life was one of the few positive aspects of my year in Pyongyang. I returned with a wallet full of cards that I had been presented with by nice people, whom I will never be able to afford to visit. Like most other aspects of my life in North Korea, constantly meeting new, interesting people became less of an attraction the longer I stayed there. Although it has much to be said for it in the short term, in the long term it is no substitute for ongoing friendships and the sense of belonging within a community. Moreover, even in the summer months, Pyongyang is by no means teeming with visitors and there were weeks when the hotels could be almost as deserted as in winter.

The opportunity to meet other foreigners brought with it the opportunity to meet more Koreans. Wherever in North Korea there are foreigners, there must needs be interpreters. Where there are English speaking foreigners, there must be English-speaking interpreters. As previously stated, the interpreters were at one time uneasy about talking to foreigners they were not officially attached to, but this had changed by the time I arrived. The authorities presumably came to the sensible view that if the country is going to open up somewhat to the outside world, and as Pyongyang is scheduled for an influx of 20,000 foreign visitors for the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students in the summer of 1989, they can no longer shelter their polyglot elite completely from the pernicious influence of the outside world. From the Korean point of view there is an element of risk in this. They are concerned lest the interpreters divulge more to the foreigner than the foreigner ought to know. They are concerned lest the foreigner disclose more information to the interpreter about the outside world in general, and how the outside world views North Korea in particular, than is good for the interpreter. The interpreter will hear a lot more open speech if he is among an
informal group of foreigners drinking together, all half-pissed, than if he is with an individual foreigner or specific group of foreigners in a relationship analogous to host and guest.

Most of the interpreters were young and the vast majority were male. The Koreans did not like to expose their women’s purity to unnecessary danger. Interestingly, on one of the few occasions when I did meet a female interpreter, they had assigned her to an African gentleman who could have been a prototype for Othello. The poor girl was in visible turmoil as he put his quiet charms to work on her. Many of the interpreters seem to be from privileged families. I met two whose fathers had been ambassadors. With their privileged backgrounds, their knowledge of languages and the opportunities for both travelling and meeting foreigners at home, the interpreters were quite sophisticated by North Korean standards. By any other standards they were like children. Early on I remember being amazed when I came across a group of young women in their late teens or early twenties whom I guessed to be college students playing tag on the banks of the Potang River. It was not just that they were playing a childhood game, but they were playing it with the high-pitched abandonment that does not survive the junior school playground in the West. Later I understood that childhood is a protracted process in North Korea, but it still seemed an extraordinary thing for an unmarried university teacher of thirty years of age to excuse himself from the Koryo at quarter to ten because his parents had only given him permission to stay out until ten o’clock.

I got to know a few of the interpreters but, with one or two exceptions, I did not cultivate their acquaintance too much. This was mainly because they did not have any money, and so if you bought a drink for yourself it was awkward not to always buy one for them as well. Some of them were greedy and would ask you to buy them cigarettes as well, or order drinks for their friends without telling you, and expect you to pay. From the point of view of researching this book they sometimes proved a good investment. Sometimes they would tell you things when they were drunk that they ought not to. Just as often, they would tell you something that was obviously true which they naïvely thought was good propaganda,
but which in fact was quite detrimental. They were invariably in awe of the freedom and affluence enjoyed by the foreigners they met. It did not happen to me because I kept them at arm’s length, but Michael and Jean-Jacques were subjected to the most tedious and sycophantic hero-worship.
CHAPTER SIX

What exactly is the Juche idea, the ‘monolithic ideology’ of the Workers’ Party of Korea? Kim Il Sung has described it as ‘a creative application of Marxism–Leninism in the conditions of our country’ (cw, Vol. 27, p. 501). He has said that ‘this idea advocates living independently, not dependently. We do not act on anyone’s orders; we judge all problems with our own intelligence, solve them in the interests of our people, and build socialism to the Koreans’ liking and in accordance with the Korean way of life’. (cw, Vol. 27, p. 309)

The Juche idea, as it has become known rather than the Juche philosophy, was originally intended then as an adaptation of Marxist–Leninist principles to Korean conditions and constituted an assertion of Korean independence – political, economic, cultural and ideological independence.

According to its author: ‘The Juche Idea implies solving all problems by regarding man as the basic factor. In a capitalist society, everything serves money, not man; capitalists know nothing but money. But in our society man is most highly valued and everything serves man. Man is the master of everything and decides everything. Man conquers nature, and man transforms society. The Juche Idea requires that everything should be made to serve man, to serve the people.’ (cw, Vol. 27, p. 309)

References to ‘the Juche Idea and the need to equip the working people firmly with our Party’s monolithic idea, the Juche Idea […] the only correct ideological guide to the successful carrying out of the Korean Revolution’ (cw, Vol. 22, p. 513) are scattered throughout the Great Leader’s works, but it is his philosophically-minded son who has refined and systematised his anthropocentric outlook into a coherent body of thought.

In a 1986 speech, On Some Problems of Education in the Juche Idea, Kim Jong Il states that: ‘Society consists of people, the social wealth they have created, and the social relations which link them. Here man is always the master’ (p. 7). Man is the master because it is man who
creates the wealth and establishes the social relations. Man exerts his will
to transform the natural world to meet his aspirations. Moreover, ‘Social
movement is the movement of man which is caused and promoted
by man. Man is the factor which brings about social movement and
the motive force behind this movement. In conformity with the level
of development of his Chajusong, creativity, and consciousness, man
proceeds with the creative movement to transform nature and society
and advances social movement to shape his own destiny. Of course, man
cannot create history in disregard of the objective conditions. But the
objective conditions are not immutable; they can be changed in favour of
man through his creative activities. It is not the objective conditions but
man that plays the decisive role in the development of history.’ (pp. 7–8)

In an earlier work, *On the Juche Idea*, the Dear Leader notes that
‘History develops through the struggle of the masses to transform nature
and society’ (p. 15). However, ‘Although they are the subject of history,
the masses of the people do not hold the same position and play the
same role in all ages and in all societies. In the class society, unaware
of their social status and class relationship and their strength for a long
time in the past, the working masses could not unite into a political force.
Therefore, they were deprived of all rights, subjected to exploitation
and oppression, by a handful of ruling class and denied their legitimate
position as masters of society. Even in the exploiting society they created
all material and cultural wealth by their own efforts, but they were unable
to shape history in an independent manner because they could not
occupy the position of masters of society. Only by seizing state power
and the means of production in their own hands and by establishing a
socialist system can the working masses free themselves from exploitation
and oppression and create history consciously as true masters of society
and their own destiny.’ (pp. 16–17)

In the Juche philosophy, this notion of the masses living as conscious
creators of history, true masters of society and their own destiny is
generally subsumed under the concept of realising their Chajusong. The
nearest equivalent in English to the term Chajusong is autonomy, but the
Koreans do not feel autonomy is sufficiently accurate because Chajusong
is a strictly social attribute of man which an individual can only acquire through participation in the collective.

In *On Some Questions in Understanding the Juche Philosophy*, Kim Jong Il emphasises that ‘Man is a product of evolution, but not his Chajusong.

‘Chajusong is a social product. Chajusong is an attribute given to men by society, not nature; it is not a natural gift, but has been formed and developed socially and historically. Nature gives man natural and biological attributes, whereas society provides him with social attributes. It can be said that man’s Chajusong is the requirement and reflection of social life, social practice.’ (p. 5)

It may be that a correct understanding of this concept of Chajusong would enable me to reconcile the apparent contradiction within a society which purports to uphold the realisation of the masses’ autonomy as its principal goal but which allows the component individuals who make up the masses the barest minimum of control over their own lives. Or perhaps the explanation for the contradiction lies in the fact that the revolution is still in a transitional phase before the complete victory of socialism and the establishment of communism, during which the masses cannot be entrusted with responsibility for their own Chajusong as they have yet to be properly ideologically remoulded.

In Juche theory, the revolution consists of three sub-revolutions, the technical, cultural, and ideological revolutions. Of the three it is the ideological revolution that is of paramount importance, and it aims at nothing less than the creation of a new type of person.

In *On the Juche Idea*, Kim Jong Il writes, ‘In order to build socialism and communism we must not only develop the productive forces and change the social relations but also transform people themselves into comprehensively developed communist men. No matter how highly the productive forces have been developed and how great the material wealth is, one could not claim to have built a communist society unless people, the masters of society, are transformed into men of communist type.

‘If we are to train people to be harmoniously developed communists,
independent and creative men, we must equip them with communist ideology and advanced scientific and technical knowledge and help them to acquire a high cultural level.

‘In particular, primary attention should be directed to the task of arming people with communist ideology.

‘The transforming of man in essence means ideological remoulding. Thoughts define man’s worth and quality and, accordingly, ideological remoulding is of the utmost importance in the transformation of man.’ (p. 62)

He returns to the theme in On Some Problems of Education in the Juche Idea. ‘The Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung said that in today’s new historical conditions we should construe Lenin’s proposition – Soviet power plus electrification equals communism – as meaning that the people’s government plus the three revolutions is communism […] Comrade Kim Il Sung instructed us that in order to build a communist society we must capture the ideological fortress as well as the material fortress, and give precedence to ideology.

‘Capturing the material fortress of communism is an undertaking that harnesses nature to meet the demands of communism. The endeavours to capture the ideological fortress are the work of reforming human beings, the masters of society, so as to meet the requirements of communism. Socialism and communism are built by men, for men. In order to build communism it is necessary, first of all, to reform the people, the masters of society, along communist lines.’ (pp. 10–11)

On page 59 of On the Juche Idea, he justifies giving primacy to the ideological revolution on the grounds that ‘one can promote the revolution one desires when the internal forces are prepared and the masses’ level of ideology is high, although other conditions are unfavourable’.

Two themes in Juche ideology that have been conspicuously developed by Kim Jong Il are the whimsical notion of ‘immortal socio-political integrity’ and the overwhelming importance of the leader and necessity for everyone else to show him unquestioning obedience. The former preoccupation can be interpreted as a reaction to the failure of the
technical revolution and the economic stagnation of recent years. The latter can be seen as a conscious attempt to consolidate his composition once his father has passed on.

In *On Some Problems of Education in the Juche Idea*, he writes: ‘For the popular masses to be an independent subject of the revolution, they must be united into one organisation with one ideology under the guidance of the party and the leader. Only the masses, who are united in this way, can shape their destiny independently and creatively. The subject of the revolution means the integrated whole of the leader, the party and the masses.

‘By uniting around the leader into organisation with a single ideology, under the guidance of the party, the masses form a socio-political organism which is immortal as an independent being. The physical life of an individual person is finite, but the integrity of the masses rallied as an independent socio-political organism is immortal.

‘The Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung clarified for the first time in history that there is socio-political integrity distinct from the physical life of individuals. An immortal socio-political integrity is inconceivable without the existence of the socio-political community which is the integrated whole of the leader, the party and the masses. Only when an individual becomes a member of this community can he acquire immortal socio-political integrity.

‘Since the socio-political organism consists of many people it needs a focal point which has unified command of the activities of the social organism. Just as a man’s brain is the centre of his life, so the leader, the top brain in a socio-political community, is the centre of the life of this community. The leader is called the top brain of the socio-political organism because he is the focal point which directs the life of this organism in a unified manner. The leader is the centre which analyses, synthesises and integrates the interests of the masses and their desire for independence; at the same time, he is the centre which has unified command of their creative abilities to put them into effect.

‘The party is the core of the masses, and it is rallied closely around the leader organisationally and ideologically; it is the pivot of the
independent socio-political organism. When individuals are united organisationally and ideologically with the leader, the centre of the socio-political organism, through party organisations, and share the same destiny with the party, they will acquire an immortal socio-political integrity. It is only when people take an active part in organisational and ideological activities as members of a party organisation or a socio-political organisation led by the party that they can become more closely tied in kinship with the leader, the centre of the socio-political organism, and exalt their socio-political integrity.

‘Since the leader, the party and the masses are welded into one socio-political organism and share the same destiny, they form a relationship based on revolutionary duty and comradeship, the relationship of helping and loving each other. Revolutionary duty and comradeship help towards uniting individual persons into a socio-political organism.

‘So far many people have talked about the value of freedom and equality. The Juche Idea also considers them valuable. This is because everybody, as the master of the world, the master of his own destiny and as an independent being, does not want to be subordinated to anyone else. However, the principle of revolutionary duty and comradeship is not on the same level as that of freedom and equality. The relationship of revolutionary duty and comradeship presupposes the relationship of freedom and equality. However, the former does not become established spontaneously simply because the latter exists. We can say that a buyer and seller are on equal terms, but we cannot say that they always love each other as comrades. It is wrong to set the relationship of freedom and equality against that of revolutionary duty and comradeship. It is also a mistake to try to dissolve one into the other.

‘From the point of view of the social community as a unit, the principle of equality contributes to the fight against subjugation and inequality in personal relationships and to the defence of the Chajusong of individuals, whereas revolutionary duty and comradeship exert a strong influence on uniting people into a socio-political organism sharing one and the same destiny and on defending the Chajusong of the social community. The principle of equality is based on the individualistic outlook on life;
it sets the greatest value on the life of individuals. On the other hand, the principle of revolutionary duty and comradeship is based on the collectivist viewpoint on life; it holds the integrity of a socio-political community incomparably dearer than the life of individuals.

‘Certainly, the socio-political organism, too, is subject to the working of the principle of equality as well as the principle of revolutionary duty and comradeship. Here, equality between individuals does not contradict revolutionary duty and comradeship. Genuine revolutionary duty and comradeship can exist only when exploitation and oppression of man by man are eliminated and equality between people is ensured. Revolutionary duty and comradeship do not restrict the Chajusong and creativity of man. On the contrary, they ensure them.

‘If man’s Chajusong and creativity are suppressed because the unity of the social community has to be maintained, it will be impossible to achieve genuine unity within the community. On the other hand, if the unity of the community is destroyed in the case of providing people with Chajusong and creativity, the integrity of the social community, the parent body of the integrity of individuals, will be impaired and thus the individuals themselves cannot be provided with Chajusong and creativity. The unity of the social community should contribute to giving full play to man’s Chajusong and creativity. And man’s Chajusong and creativity must always refrain from going beyond the bounds of the unity of the community. This means that only through a harmonious combination of the principles of equality and comradeship can the problems be solved of giving full play to the Chajusong and creativity of individuals and of cementing the unity of the community. Certainly, this is not an easy task, and certainly the problems do not resolve themselves of their own accord. That is why I have stressed more than once the need for leadership in a social community.

‘Since the leader is the centre of the life of a socio-political community, revolutionary duty and comradeship must also be centred on the leader. Revolutionary duty and comradeship find their most noble expression in the relationship between the leader and his men. Within the socio-political organism in which a common destiny is shared by all, the
principle of duty and comradeship governs the relationship between individuals, too. But in this case the principle is not absolute because none of the individuals is the centre of the life of the socio-political community. However, loyalty to the leader and comradeship towards him are absolute and unconditional because the leader, as the top brain of the socio-political organism, represents the integrity of the community [...].

‘We must also fully understand that the leader plays the decisive role in the revolution and construction. Being at the centre of unity and leadership, he plays the decisive role in shaping the destiny of the popular masses. This is similar to the brain of a man playing the decisive role in his activities.’ (pp. 19–24)

An article I revised emanating, I think, from the Academy of Juche Sciences, extended the anatomical metaphor to compare the leader to the brain, the party to the central nervous system which conducts messages from the brain to the limbs, the popular masses who carry out the leader’s instructions. Kim Jong Il goes on to conclude that ‘The basic quality of a communist revolutionary of the Juche type consists of a sound revolutionary attitude to the leader and of the appreciation that loyalty to him is the lifeblood of a communist’. (p. 24)

In his opinion, ‘The Juche Idea is a perfect revolutionary doctrine: it shows the way for people to become absolute masters of the world and of their own destiny by completely transforming nature, society and human beings themselves in accordance with the essential social quality of men who want to live and develop independently, as well as the way for the lasting happiness and prosperity of mankind to be achieved’ (Education in Juche Idea, p. 2). It ‘not only provides a correct outlook and viewpoint on nature, society, and man, but also demonstrates a perfect revolutionary theory, strategy and tactics, and leadership theory and methods.’ (Ibid., pp. 8–9)

He recommends that ‘The party and people of every country must firmly establish Juche in ideology, and carry out the revolution and construction in their country in a responsible manner, with the attitude of masters.’ (On the Juche Idea, p. 37)
He maintains that ‘Just as a man’s worth is defined by his ideology, so the greatness of a nation is determined by the greatness of its guiding ideology’ (Education in the Juche Idea, p. 15). On this basis I leave the reader to form his own evaluation of the greatness of Juche Korea.
CHAPTER SEVEN

The Ansan Chodasso was handily situated for observing the construction in progress. This was not an inconsiderable asset. There is not much else to see in Pyongyang. Pyongyang is a nice, clean, orderly place and offers some pleasant walks by the river, but it has little variety and none of the colourful street life that makes other third-world cities so fascinating to wander about in. Because it has all been recently built and is the city of what is truly a nearly uniformly working-class society, Pyongyang is a pretty homogeneous place. It is the same throughout the city: wide main roads fronted by blocks of multi-storeyed apartment buildings and, discreetly tucked away behind them, meaner apartment blocks and rows of little white tile-roof cottages for the less advantaged citizens. As for street life, when they are not hard at work building the socialist construction or participating in some other approved, organised activity, the people are at home watching the locally assembled black and white television sets they saved up for months to buy.

The Ansan Chodasso overlooked a light industry complex which included a printing works and a briefcase factory. Both my rooms gave on to spacious balconies. From my bedroom balcony I overlooked the entrance to the complex and I could watch our dainty doll-like people’s guards, automatic rifles at the ready, bayonets fixed, in inaction as they safeguarded the revolutionary gains. All the factories and enterprises in North Korea, including the publishing house, have armed guards on duty at the gates around the clock. It is an extraordinary precaution in a country with precious little crime. Officially their presence is to guard against spies and saboteurs as well as criminals. The real purpose for this and other similar phenomena in the DPRK is to impress upon the people that they are living in a society under siege from hostile forces, so that they will adopt an appropriate siege mentality where one accepts that it is necessary to work jolly hard to survive and unrealistic to entertain expectations of greater reward, and where everyone must pull together and trust their leaders because danger is lurking just outside the door. As
an additional security precaution a few workers are assigned each night to sleep at their factory.

It was a dull old life being a people’s guard. Our little girls, however, could look forward to some variety in their day’s work as they took it in turns to guard the back of the factory as well as the front. Every so often two of them would march in single file diagonally across the yard and disappear behind the building opposite. A few minutes later the two they were relieving would march back towards the front gate. They usually performed this ritual in correct military fashion but once I saw a pair of them lose their discipline after stopping to banter with some of the boys from the factory. They finished up crossing the yard side by side, giggling and holding hands, rifles still slung incongruously over their shoulders.

My living room balcony overlooked the yard and the three main buildings of the complex, two of which had been erected in the space of just one month in 1986 with the minimum of mechanical assistance, through what they call a ‘vigorous speed campaign’. Two years later, hardly any of the windows had been glazed. Polythene sheets held wind and rain at bay. Glass is expensive and the construction can be built quite satisfactorily without the luxury of windows.

Several hundred workers were employed there. Most of them were young. Every morning I would see them arriving eagerly for work on foot. Not even the director general or party secretary warranted a car. There was a factory car, a small Toyota, but it was strictly to convey senior management on official business. No-one came to work on a bicycle. Although common elsewhere in North Korea, the use of bicycles is severely restricted in Pyongyang, presumably because bicycles would make the country’s showpiece look untidy and give the place a third-world air. At lunch time the young workers would all be outside playing noisy and energetic games of volleyball and football, just like in a school playground. When they had to go and work in the fields, they were packed like sardines into the backs of lorries. The girls used to put sheets of cardboard down on the floor of the truck to keep the seats of their pants clean – Koreans are very fastidious like that – and squeeze up together with their knees tucked under their chins. They thought it was a
great adventure. All round the clock old-fashioned machinery hummed and boomed, the pulse and heartbeat of the great socialist construction.

The nearly construction site of the bridge could be a considerable nuisance when one wanted to go to the Potanggang, but it was also a focus of interest. Apart from a few cranes that in Europe would have been rejected as too dilapidated for an industrial museum, there was no machinery permanently on site. The bridge was erected with the help of slow, antiquated cement mixers, wheelbarrows, spades and base muscle. I saw workers dragging great slabs of concrete into position with the aid of nothing more than ropes. They did not have proper scaffolding with which to support the structure of the bridge, but improvised with rough-hewn timbers nailed together.

The period when I was there coincided with an orgy of construction work in Pyongyang. They were building a new airport and enough high-rise apartment blocks to house a projected 25,000 families. To put a veneer of reality on their bid to co-host the 1988 Olympic Games with Seoul, precious manpower and material were being squandered on building a complex of sports halls and gymnasiums known as the Angol Sports Village, the 150,000 capacity Runguado Stadium, and a number of hotels including a world-record-breaking 105-storey hotel to augment the hotels they already have standing empty for ninety per cent of the time. Consequently the capital could not furnish enough manpower for all these building projects and young workers had had to be mobilised from the provinces to build the bridge. The young workers not only worked on their construction site, they lived on it in cramped temporary barracks which they put up themselves and where they slept side by side on the floor with scarcely room to turn over. They kept their accommodation scrupulously clean. They slept on a raised floor. Just inside the door was a gully where they left their shoes so as not to drag dirt into the sleeping area. They were warm in winter, thanks to the proximity of their comrades and underfloor heating. The traditional Korean cottage boasts a rudimentary but effective central heating system. The kitchen stove is at one end of the cottage, but instead of the heat being discharged straight up a chimney, it is carried through a pipe beneath the floor and
expelled at the other end of the building. As the workers’ kitchens were housed in a separate building, they lit a fire in an outside fireplace at one end of their barracks and employed the same principle.

Both men and women were mobilised for this construction project. The women endured the same spartan living conditions as the men and performed the same arduous toil in sub-zero temperatures in winter or in the torrential monsoon rain in summer. Like workers in more permanent establishments they were expected to augment their food supply by cultivating their own vegetable patches. They even kept a few pigs. In the autumn they clogged one stretch of river with a particularly repulsive-looking water plant that nobody could tell me the English name for: a sort of grotesque cousin to the lotus, it was bright green in colour and rubbery in texture. Pigs apparently love it.

An outsider might have reasonably compared their living conditions to a slave labour camp. They did not see it that way. They were discharging their revolutionary duty and exalting their youth. They were sharing the joys of comradeship. They might well have accounted themselves privileged to have been given the opportunity to leave their native places and stay for two years in the famous metropolis.

Scattered around the construction site were noticeboards plastered with revolutionary posters and slogans exhorting them to work harder, and also charts showing the number of workpoints that were being scored by each work-team and individual worker. Some pecuniary award attached to high scores but it was not substantial. The chief motivation remained personal pride and prestige. Top scorers each week had their photographs taken, something North Koreans love, and displayed on the noticeboards for public admiration.

As on all North Korean construction sites, they were visited at intervals throughout the day by loudspeaker vans to spur them on with stirring revolutionary music interspersed with slogans shrieked out in a shrill falsetto. Less frequently itinerant brass bands would come round and treat them to a live concert.

These young people are the communist revolutionaries of Juche type who have been moulded behind North Korea’s sealed frontiers,
immunised from any corrupting influence from the outside world, any breath of doubt or freedom, any knowledge of an alternative life. From early childhood they have been trained to live disciplined, organised and collective lives. Had it not been financially impracticable, Kim Il Sung would have preferred all the children to be educated in boarding schools so that their conditioning could have been more rigorous. They are conditioned to behave as soldiers, ready to obey any order at any time, no questions asked, without thought for their personal safety or well-being. They must trust their cadres in the chain of command that descends from Supreme Commander Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung to have thought of that for them.

They are taught that they live in an ideal society where the worker is master of the state and of his destiny, enjoying benefits and privileges denied to workers elsewhere in the world, and that they must at all times behave in a manner befitting masters. In their culture the worker is constantly portrayed as hero. Everything they read, see and hear throughout their lives reinforces those messages. They are also inducted into the community, comfort and consolation of the state religion. They are united in worship of the Great Leader. Doubt and deviance are dealt with paternalistically by the cadres who must be priests of Juche first, managers and technicians second, and who are expected to try and emulate the qualities of the fatherly leader.

These people are the sort of labour force Mrs Thatcher must dream about. Utterly quiescent, they will go anywhere they are needed in the economy. They will put up with the most basic living conditions. They will accept minimal wages. They will perform back-breaking toil without protest or complaint on a daily diet of pickled cabbage and seven hundred and fifty grams of grain. They do not strike. They are patriotic and grateful for what they are given. Most of them are even chaste. There are some workers who, when their day’s work at their own workplace is done, go voluntarily to another workplace or construction site to lend a hand in their spare time.
I have long subscribed to the view that physical illness usually has a psychological component.

I felt quite healthy the first few weeks in Pyongyang, when everything was new and I was enjoying myself. The work was absurd, of course, but it was different, it was stress-free, and a rich source of unintentional humour. The sun shone as it ought to when a chap is on holiday. When I was not working I roamed the streets like the dedicated tourist I was, devouring the sights and sounds, trying to form an understanding of the culture. I drank Scotch on my balcony, watching the factory hands at work and play. I explored the construction site. I liked to travel on the Pyongyang Underground with its murals, brass reliefs, marble floors and pillars, gaudy coloured lights and interminable escalators.

It takes a good two or three minutes to descend from the surface to the platforms on the Pyongyang Underground. The stations are deliberately deep below the surface in order to serve as air-raid shelters in the event of another war. It is forbidden to save time by walking on the escalators. At the foot of the escalators are little glass cabins in which officials are stationed to watch out for people breaking the rules. Nobody does break the rules and the officials are usually asleep.

A particular source of fascination and Pyongyang’s number one tourist attraction was the traffic conductresses in their gorgeous kingfisher blue uniforms (except in summer, when they exchange their blue tunics for white). There are traffic conductors as well, but they are far outnumbered by the female of the species and are far less interesting. These invariably stunning-looking girls stand in the middle of the road at every major junction and imperiously direct the traffic rotating with stylised movements like well-drilled guardsmen and pointing with their red and white striped batons, like miniature barber’s poles, that turn luminous at night. It may be that this occupation carries high prestige. It is fairly obvious that they are selected partly for their good looks and physical grace. For whatever reason, these young women seemed
to have taken the Great Leader’s dictum about adopting the attitude of masters of society more to heart than any other distinguishable group of workers. Even away from their posts, they strode the pavements of Pyongyang with all the poise and assurances of millionairesses in Knightsbridge.*

In the context of a holiday, it was very nice to go to the Koryo Hotel of an evening and meet different people every night from all over the world in luxurious surroundings.

By the middle of October, the weather had started to turn cold, I was fed up with sitting at a desk all day revising stupid texts, I had seen as much as there was to see in Pyongyang (more or less), I was weary of striking up ephemeral friendships. I had had enough of eating rice and soup twice a day, seven days a week. We were, in fact, served other dishes as well but rice and soup were the staple at lunch and dinner. David Richardson’s predictions about the mail had come true and the lack of news from home was unsettling. In short, I had had a good, long holiday abroad and I wanted to go home. Although I was still charmed by the country and under a lot of misapprehensions, it was beginning to dawn upon me that I had made a mistake. I was coming to the realisation that in Pyongyang it would be impossible for me to establish any sort of real life for myself, even on a temporary basis. A friend of mine from Hong Kong who occasionally came to Pyongyang on business echoed what were to become my feelings when he said that it was one of his favourite places to visit, and the last place he would ever want to live. My problem was that I had given up a job in England and it would take me many months to save enough money to cushion my return.

My initial response to this emotional turnabout was denial. I tried to force myself into a positive frame of mind. I suspect the effort set up tension that contributed to my illness. Afterwards I allowed myself to loathe every minute spent in Pyongyang. I counted off the days and weeks of my sentence on the calendar like a prisoner and remained reasonably

* It will be a sad day when traffic lights become the norm in Pyongyang. Already they have some in place, but as yet they cannot afford the electricity to run them.
well. I also turned my vague intention to write about being in Pyongyang into a firm resolve. It seemed the only way to redeem the time.

There were many little things in life I missed in Pyongyang. I missed turning on the television and understanding what was being said. I missed having my own car outside the front door. I missed being able to walk down the street without being stared at. One of the things I missed most was playing football. In Leeds I used to keep tolerably fit by playing five-a-side football at least once a week.

There were not many opportunities available for physical recreation to the foreigner in Pyongyang. Apart from the ubiquitous table tennis tables, there did not seem to be many opportunities for sport available to the average Korean adult. For me, the only option was swimming, something I had not done for a long time in Leeds. There is a tiny pool in the basement of the Koryo Hotel. There is also an Olympic-sized pool in the Changwang Health Complex.

The Changwang Health Complex is a typical Pyongyang public building, all granite on the outside, all marble within. It contains the swimming pool and an indoor and an outdoor wading pool. But during the week, when foreigners are forbidden entry, the most popular facilities are the baths. There are two floors of baths. There are communal baths, private baths, and family baths. Nothing fancy, not Turkish baths or sauna baths; simply places for the population to come and get clean. Even today in North Korea most households are without hot running water and bathing facilities. Even in some of the newer apartment blocks, where baths and showers are installed, they are having difficulty for some reason in supplying just cold water for more than three or four hours a day. However, people evidently do not consider it any hardship to go down to the Changwang Health Complex to take a bath. I knew young people from privileged families who had baths at home and hot water, as in the Ansan Chodasso, supplied regularly for about five hours a day for two-thirds of the year, who still went down to the Changwang Health Complex for a bath and a drink in the cafeteria afterwards as a social activity. As I keep saying, there is not a lot to do in Pyongyang.

On Saturdays, in typical North Korean fashion, the foreign residents
are allowed in and the Koreans are kept out. It is the swimming pool’s turn to become the popular facility. I took to going down for a long swim every Saturday afternoon. On Sundays I used to ache in my left shoulder. This did not surprise me. The previous August I had incurred a nasty fracture of my left arm in a collision playing football. It happened in the same week as I applied for the job in North Korea. There was a psychological component to this injury. Anyone who is so weak in the head as to be seriously contemplating working in North Korea is in far too delicate a state to be taking part in a robust game of soccer. The fracture took a long time to mend. My arm was in pot for fully thirteen weeks. As my shoulder was consequently immobilised all this time, it was predictable that there should be some atrophy of the muscles and that they should ache after unaccustomed exercise. I could live with a certain amount of stiffness and discomfort on a Sunday. It was a small price to pay for the sense of well-being that follows a good workout and for having something to look forward to on Saturday afternoons in Pyongyang. I was not too worried when I woke up on a Sunday morning towards the end of October, in pain rather than discomfort. I thought I had probably stiffened up more than usual as a result of walking straight home after swimming, when a stiff autumn wind was blowing, instead of having a cup of coffee while my body temperature normalised. I was not unduly worried that evening when I set out for the disco at the Changgwangsan Hotel to meet some East German tourists I had befriended, only to have to turn back because I was in too much discomfort to be able to socialise with anybody. I drank a couple of beers out of the fridge, went to bed, and fell asleep immediately.

Nothing prepared me for the agony with which I was thrust into consciousness at four o’clock that morning. I spent the next ten minutes trying to lever myself out of bed with the help of my bedside table. Although the slightest movement compounded the pain, I was impelled by that blind compulsion to escape that always overrides the obvious rationale that it is impossible to move away from pain when it is inside one’s own body. That same compulsion had me pacing the floor for the next three and a half weary hours as I waited for the building to come to
life so that I could seek help. I could not lie down. I could not sit. I could not read. I drank innumerable cups of coffee and smoked and paced and paced. There was only one thought that penetrated the cloud of pain that rose up out of my shoulder blade and enveloped my consciousness. What the hell was I doing here? In Leeds I would have been straight out of my front door, into the car, and into the comforting embrace of Leeds General Infirmary’s casualty department.

The time passed eventually. I went down to breakfast. I asked Michael, who was adept at both French and Spanish, to speak to the interpreters on my behalf. Presently I was whisked to the Foreigners’ Hospital in Pyongyang, a hospital specially reserved for foreigners and overseas Koreans. It is in line with typical North Korean policy that they provide a special well-equipped and well-appointed hospital for foreigners. They do not want any unnecessary contact between foreigners and locals, and they wish to give foreigners a misleading impression of the high standard of medical facilities in the country. Not that medical care in North Korea is bad by third-world standards. As one might expect in such a well ordered society, everyone is vaccinated against all major diseases. Standards of hygiene in hospitals and clinics are good. The African students felt that the standards of medical theory were reasonable. What is predominantly lacking are modern drugs which the country cannot afford. As this is a deteriorating problem, there has in recent years been a shift of emphasis towards traditional Eastern methods of treatment, but these would seem to be more efficacious for some disorders than for others, and even traditional herbal medicines are in short supply. I revised numerous articles for the periodicals about how wonderful traditional Korean medicine was, but evidently the Great Leader had not heard about this because when he wanted to have the growth on the back of his neck removed a few years ago, he took himself off to Europe for treatment. As it happened, I was treated largely by traditional methods and I did get better in time. Since my return to Europe, friends in the medical profession have told me that traditional oriental methods were probably as suitable for my condition as any other.

I was not sure what to expect when I arrived at the hospital that
morning. I was in considerable pain but I still imagined that all I was suffering from was a severe muscular reaction to excessive swimming that could easily be rectified. All the pain at that point was concentrated in one area around my shoulder blade.

The clean, well-appointed hospital building inspired confidence. I had been assured when I set off that there was an English speaking interpreter based full-time at the hospital but she was nowhere in evidence when I arrived. Fortunately, the doctor who examined me spoke a little English, enough to understand where the pain was and when it had started. She sent me for an X-ray and then to the physiotherapist for heat treatment. The heat treatment seemed to help. I was still in pain but it was no longer insupportable. I returned to the Ansan Chodasso, expecting the pain to abate gradually over the course of the next few days.

I was to be sadly disappointed. Not only did my pain intensify over the course of the rest of that day, but it spread. By the end of the evening I had a rope of fire running from the base of my neck across my shoulder blade and all down my left arm. My fingertips were without sensation and once again I found myself in the ludicrous situation where I was going to have to survive hours, in this case a whole night, of total misery before I could get medical help, when at home I could have been at a hospital in minutes.

When I finally got to the hospital the next day, I encountered further misery. Instead of seeing the doctor, I was taken straight up to physiotherapy. The physiotherapist was a delightful lady but her English was on about a par with my Korean. The range of my Korean vocabulary never extended beyond that of an average two-year-old. I tried to explain to her that I was very grateful for her heat treatment and all that, but I was in far worse pain than I had been the day before. It was all down my arm and what she had to offer was having no impact on whatever it was I had got. I urged her to let me see a doctor with an interpreter. I suppose if I had had the wherewithal to put on more of a pantomime, I might have got through to her but, being British, my impulse was to do my best to comport myself with as much decorum and dignity as my agony would permit and, because my agony was sapping all my resources, I
did not have the energy to overcome my natural tendency to behave in a restrained manner. Consequently the poor woman was at a complete loss to understand what I was jabbering about but did not perceive me as being sufficiently agitated for her to go and fetch somebody else. After she left the room my driver, who spoke not a word of English but for some reason had chosen to accompany me round the hospital, presumably because it was more entertaining to watch me being treated than to wait in the car, mimed pulling his zip down and going to the toilet. He was evidently enquiring if what I wanted was to know where the toilet was. This was the last straw. My dignity went out of the window. I put my head in my hands and wept with frustration.

I ended up being driven all the way back to the Ansan Chodasso on the other side of the city. There Jean-Jacques explained for me to our interpreters that I was in excruciating pain and needed to go straight back to the hospital. On this occasion we made a detour to the publishing house to collect one of the English translators to interpret for me. I should add that, given the state of some of Pyongyang’s roads, these car journeys were doing nothing to alleviate my condition.

When we got back to the hospital, I was examined by a different doctor and given my first taste of traditional medicine. I had to lie prone on a couch. The doctor took half a dozen glass bowls. He put wads of cotton wool into the bowls and set fire to them. He then stuck the bowls in strategic positions all down the left side of my back. The burning cotton wool evidently creates some sort of suction effect because the rims of the bowls gripped like clamps into my flesh. The effect was rather like being bitten by a crocodile. The connection between mind and physical pain is an unfathomable mystery: why does the toothache always feel easier when one is sitting in the dentist’s waiting room? I do not know why it was: the relief of at last having an interpreter with me, the doctor’s air of professional assurance, or the dramatic physical quality of the treatment. You don’t notice your backache when a crocodile’s biting you. Whatever the reason, when he eventually removed the cups, I placed the palms of my hands on the couch and levered myself up with both arms without the slightest twinge of pain. Words could not express my admiration
for this oriental wizard who had driven out my agony. Through the
interpreter I asked how it had worked and whether there was any danger
of the pain returning. I was told that the treatment worked on the central
nervous system and that it was possible that the pain might return.

Just how possible I discovered on the drive back to the Ansan Chodasso.
Almost before we got there I was back to square one. In almost thirty-
eight years in Britain I only ever spent two nights in a hospital. I had
been in Pyongyang for just over two months and I was about to spend
the next two weeks in the Foreigners’ Hospital.

The standard of the accommodation in the Foreigners’ Hospital
in Pyongyang is like I imagine a private clinic in the West would be.
The North Koreans spare no expense when it comes to impressing
foreigners. I had a private room with a refrigerator and a colour tv set, a
bathroom en suite and a balcony. The balcony proved indispensable. The
regulations against smoking in the building were so strict that cigarettes
were not even permitted in the day room.

The immediate boon for me about going into hospital was that I
had a firm hospital mattress under my back and a high hospital bed
with handgrips in the frame, which made getting in and out of bed a
hundred times easier. The actual treatment seemed at first to have little
impact on my condition. Every day I was given a vitamin injection and
sent to physiotherapy for heat treatment. Every two or three days I was
given acupuncture and the glass bowls again. I remained in considerable
physical pain. The only way to avoid it was to lie flat and keep perfectly
still. I was also by now extremely worried. It is alarming when a body
that one day swims a kilometre with ease is two days later hardly able to
get itself in and out of bed. I had been admitted to hospital but I had still
not the slightest idea what was wrong with me. I knew very little Korean
and I was being treated by a doctor and nursing staff who knew very little
English. It was a great relief then when on my third day as an inpatient I
received a visit from the fabled hospital interpreter. I asked her to arrange
for me to see the doctor in her presence so that I could find out from
him what it was I was suffering from and what his prognosis was.

She returned to my room with the doctor that afternoon. I had been
in Korea long enough by then. I should have anticipated what sort of response I would get to my enquiries. By coincidence, just at the time when I was admitted to hospital I had been revising in a book of fairy stories about the indomitable woman revolutionary fighter Kim Jong Suk, the president’s first wife and the mother of the Dear Leader, a passage in which she tells the leader of a village children’s corps that there are two essential virtues which a good revolutionary needs, and that one is punctuality and the other is secrecy. The fetish for secrecy is one of the dominant traits in North Korean society. The Koreans are not only secretive in their dealings with foreigners. They are secretive in their dealings with each other, in the sense that nobody is told anything he does not need to know, nor is anyone ever told anything before it is absolutely necessary for him to know. A Korean who is to be temporarily dispatched to another town or even another country will be lucky to get a week’s notice of the date of his departure. There is method in this madness because it serves to create a social climate in which the individual feels totally at the mercy of the state and must therefore, if he is to preserve his equilibrium, adopt an attitude of perfect trust towards the state and its authorities. They must trust what Kim Jong Il refers to as ‘the material Party and paternal leader’ (Education in Juche Idea, p. 26), as a child trusts his parents. Already I was aware that secrecy was the norm in North Korea but I had yet to appreciate the absurd lengths to which it is taken. Consequently when, after a lengthy conversation with the doctor in Korean, the interpreter turned to me and said, ‘The doctor says when there is something you need to know, he will tell you’, I was so taken aback that for the moment I was stunned into silence.

The following day I redoubled my determination. I again assembled the doctor and interpreter in my room. I explained that it was normal in my culture for a patient to be told what was the matter with him and what was being done about it, and it was therefore disquieting to me not to have this information. I was reluctantly informed that I had neuralgia, that the doctor was confident he could cure it, but it would be a slow process and I would have to remain in hospital for about a fortnight. I
then asked the interpreter to ask the doctor why he could not have said this yesterday. She declined to translate my question.

I was still in pain. The slightest physical effort provoked agony. Sitting on the edge of the bed to attempt the dreadful meals they brought me, going out on my balcony to smoke, taking a shower, all involved complicated battles to master my pain. But at least I knew now that all I was suffering from was neuralgia, a not very serious condition with a pronounced psychosomatic factor, probably attributable in my case to a physically susceptible area of the body plus the tension created by having to adapt to a strange and increasingly uncongenial environment. I settled down with an easier mind to wait for rest, time and medical intervention to restore me to health.

It was helpful that I had confidence in the doctor. Subscribing to the national cult of secrecy was not his only eccentricity. His diagnostic method consisted of prodding me in the back and snarling, ‘Pain? Pain? Where pain?’, or pulling my arched back sharply until I exclaimed, ‘Pain! Pain! There’s the pain, you bastard!’ Nevertheless, he always had the air of knowing what he was about, and in his less playful moments he looked precisely what I suppose he was, a distinguished, middle-aged consultant physician. His characteristic demeanour suggested intelligence, shrewdness, self-assurance and, untypical in a North Korea, urbanity and sophistication. I often used to wonder what he thought in his private moments to the bizarre society he lived in, how such a man viewed the naïve and all-pervasive propaganda and the presidential personality cult.

I could guess what the pensioners of Pyongyang thought, the old people who gathered every Sunday afternoon when the weather was fine in the vicinity of the Juche Tower in the Taedonggang Pleasure Park. The old women put on their best traditional costume and gathered round in circles to dance their traditional peasant dances to the beat of the changgo drum, similar to a conga drum except that it is hung on the drummer’s shoulder and played at the horizontal. While the ladies danced, their menfolk preferred to squat around playing cards or Korean chess. Whenever I used to come upon these geriatric gyrators,
their good-natured faces lit up with conviviality, I sensed that these good people, who had grown up under the Japanese colonial rule and fled as young adults from the American bombs, never entertained the slightest doubt that they were living in a communist paradise and that their Great Leader was a Moses who had led his people out of the wilderness into the promised land. These people would have had little knowledge and less interest in the world beyond the boundaries of Korea. All they knew was that they lived in this magnificent modern city that they had resurrected from the rubble of war under the guidance of the Great Leader. They had enjoyed thirty years of peace and security, thirty years when they had never gone hungry. In old age now, they had little to worry about. If they fell ill, there were doctors. In extremis, they knew they could rely on the state to look after them, but they need have little concern for that eventuality. The ancient obligations of kinship are alive and well in Kim Il Sung’s Korea. Old people live with their children and grandchildren but they do not depend on them for their food or pocket money. They have their own daily grain ration and their pension.

Only among young educated Koreans can one discern serious doubts about the health of their society, and then the doubts seem to give rise to more emotional confusion than critical thinking.

I once commented to Sami on how little many of the ones who had travelled or even lived abroad seemed to have been affected by their experience. His theory was that they were so deeply indoctrinated that they were encased in their ideology like a cocoon that made them impervious to outside influences. He had known Koreans serving as diplomats in Beirut, including before the troubles, in Moscow, and in Paris. In his experience few of them felt a strong attraction to the fun and freedom available in the outside world. Most were homesick for the familiar world of Juche Korea.

While I was in Pyongyang there was plenty of evidence to suggest that exposure to affluent foreigners made North Koreans greedy and materialistic, but it did not seem to be giving rise to much ideological questioning. The system under which they have been raised, of course, is hardly conducive to the development of a capacity for critical thinking.
It was usually among older Koreans that I occasionally detected the light of irony and sensed a lurking capacity for critical thought. I discerned these qualities in the head of the English department at the publishing house, a taciturn but charming man who used to call on me from time to time. He was the sort of chap who in England would have been a gentle, shabbily dressed don with a wry sense of humour and a penchant for the bottle. Even when he had made deep inroads into my whisky bottle, he always remained far too discreet to express any overt political views, but my impression was that he looked upon the cult of the Great Leader and the Juche Idea with whimsical detachment, but he could remember bitter days and was not on the whole displeased by the way his country was developing. I would have been very curious to know what sort of thoughts passed through the mind of a man of my doctor’s calibre when he turned on the television in the evening to an endless stream of propaganda.

It is perhaps a little unfair to dismiss Korean television as nothing but an endless stream of propaganda, but only a little. During my two weeks in hospital I watched quite a lot of television. It made a change from reading and it was something I could do standing up. For some reason I found it much less painful at that time to stand than to sit. By the end of a week I could endure to stand up for half an hour at a time, whereas I could not sit for more than five minutes before the pain drove me back into bed. An astonishing amount of viewing time is given over to documentary-style celebrations of the Great Leader, the glorious achievements of the Juche revolution, and also to the architectural splendours of Pyongyang and the natural beauty of the Korean countryside. The people are encouraged to take a great pride in their country’s natural beauty. But they do have dramas and light entertainment. Every week there is an amateur song contest, when the workers and peasants get the chance to put on their finery and step into the spotlight. Koreans, as mentioned before, love to sing and these amateurs turn in very stirring performances. Their eyes shine and they make impassioned gestures as they perform the
well-loved revolutionary ditties that extol the virtues of the Great Leader and the victories of the socialist revolution, to the accompaniment of accordion and guitar. When they have poured their hearts out, impassive judges press buttons. A red light comes on if their performance has gained the judge’s approval. A green lights denotes failure. Then the performer has to stand and listen to the judge’s criticism before departing the stage. The performers do not mind. Public criticism has become a standard part of daily life in their culture. It is considered good for people. Before they pour their hearts out, the performers announce their names and occupations. They have exciting jobs like fitter at the Kum Song General Tractor Plant, electrician at the February 8th Vindon Factory, or sub-work-team leader on a co-operative farm. At any rate they perceive their jobs as exciting. For this is a society where the highest honour is not to be made a knight of the realm, but to be decorated as a Labour Hero. Outstanding sportsmen and entertainers enjoy a modest celebrity but the quintessential heroes of the Juche Korea are the workers and peasants and men of the Korean People’s Army, who exceed annual production quotas, grow record crop yields, or build the West Sea Barrage, and the media do not let people forget this. There are no chat shows where glittering celebrities offer tantalising glimpses into their personal lives on North Korean television. Instead there are images of determined men up to their waists in foaming, icy water laying pipes or building factories in the snow. These are the activities that are portrayed as glamorous in North Korea.

At nine o’clock each evening the news comes on the television. Just like in the real world. There all similarities end. The newsreader always starts off with the same words, ‘Waidehon Sungong Kim Il Sung Donzi’, ‘the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung’. Then follows a résumé of what the great man has said and done today. Then there are likely to be some announcements about the activities of the Dear Leader. Nobody else gets much of a mention. As far as the general public knows, other high officials and ministers of state are merely ‘attendant lords, ones that will do/To swell a progress, start a scene or two’. The only time any of them get much of a write-up is when they are safely dead.
The rest of the world hardly ever gets a mention on the North Korean news except for South Korea, when the students and workers take to the streets in protest. Scenes of confrontation between South Korean students and police are shown over and over again. The rest of the news is just propaganda about the brilliant successes of the national economy. There are reports on factories which have broken production records, and interviews with the cadres who always have to say that their success is entirely due to the Great Leader and his heir. This is meant to be good for the national morale and to feed the self-esteem of the average worker. Not such a bad thing. In any society there are more average workers than there are stars of the entertainment industry. It is not unreasonable to regard the daily heroism of the miner as more worthy of note than the private agonies of a soap opera star. The brave wiremen workteam of the Yonggwant district branch of the Yonggwant County Power Distribution Station, who insisted that the power should be kept running while they laid new electric wires over extremely high-voltage wires because they did not want to interrupt production at local factories, deserved their fame. The trouble is that most sectors of the North Korean economy have not been performing well in recent years. Even a people as simple as the North Koreans, when they watch the news or read the paper, must wonder why, when they have such a brilliant national economy, they have less to eat than they did ten years ago.

Korean drama must be high on ideological as well as artistic merit. In other words, it has to serve principally propaganda purposes. Consequently Korean films are deficient in characterisation, subtlety and verisimilitude, but they do have their share of romance, melodrama, action, tension and even violence. There are North Korean martial arts movies that are every bit as violent as anything made with Bruce Lee. One thing you do not get is comedy. Cultivation of the comic outlook on life could have a very damaging effect on people’s attitude toward the Juche Idea. I do not suppose the standard of programme on North Korean television is so much worse than the average peak-time viewing rubbish in the West. However, it is a small, poor country and cannot produce enough programmes to fill two channels seven nights a week.
The same programmes and films are repeated over and over again. The song contest is probably shown three times a week. Not surprisingly, people become bored. At the weekend the whole of the population turns over to the third channel. The Mansudae channel has been in operation for the last few years, broadcasting dubbed foreign TV programmes and films, mainly from China and Eastern Europe. Most of what is shown is not very good, and there is a preponderance of ancient Russian war movies, but at least it gives the people a bit of variety.

Korean television normally begins transmission at six in the evening and closes down promptly at eleven. Staying up late is not encouraged. There are broadcasts during the daytime on Sundays and, if I remember correctly, on the 11th, 21st and 31st of each month. These are the days when the peasants are allowed to take a break. They are less privileged than the urban workers, being only entitled to three days’ respite a month from toil. For some reason there is also one day a month when there is no television at all.

I think it was during my spell in hospital that I first began to realise how poor the people actually are. My balcony looked out across the hospital gardens over the road to a compound in which were set rows of tiny whitewashed cottages with crudely tiled roofs. There was a well in the compound where the women used to squat and wash their clothes. I had seen this type of accommodation before in the countryside, but had not thought it still existed in the city. In the months to come, as my explorations of Pyongyang took me further off the main thoroughfares, I found more and more of these traditional cottages. The pattern is the same throughout the city. All the main roads are fronted by relatively attractive modern apartment blocks. Step behind these apartment blocks and there will be shabbier blocks or else rows and rows of these comparatively primitive dwellings, discreetly hidden from the view of the casual passer-by. It is like stepping backward in time. You never see photographs of this type of housing in Korea Today. The cottages contain neither running water nor modern sanitary facilities. The residents share latrines that in summer emit a powerful stench.

Interestingly, these humble dwellings were clean and adequately
furnished, many contained television sets, and the residents were as well-groomed as the rest of the population. The fact that such poor quality housing stock proliferates even in the capital, the national showcase, testifies to the gulf between North Korea’s propaganda and the reality of its economic development. The fact that the residents of these dwellings maintain such high standards of household and personal care testifies to something else. The only reason why these houses cannot be classed as squalid slums is that the people who live in them do not permit their homes to degenerate into slums or themselves into slum-dwellers.

Another thing I noticed was that the nurses in the hospital, although always immaculately turned out, wore the same clothes day after day. Afterwards I noticed that the waitresses at the Ansan Chodasso, the girls who cleared the rooms, the translators at the publishing house, even the staff in the hotels, were wearing the same clothes, the same skirts and blouses and cardigans, the same jackets and jumpers and shirts, day after day. Yet they all managed to look neat, clean and presentable. It is a good thing that Koreans know how to look after their clothes when they have so few of them. They either do not sweat like the rest of us, or there must be a lot of washing clothes at bedtime and hanging them to dry overnight going on. They are certainly keen on clothes being folded and put away. The nurse who usually attended on me in the hospital was forever picking up my scarf and jumper from my chair where I had dumped them in readiness for my next foray onto the balcony for a cigarette. She used to fold them and put them away in the cupboard and hiss at me, ‘Clothes, Andrew, clothes in cupboard.’

This admirable, if perhaps excessive, impulse towards cleanliness, neatness and order is endemic in every aspect of Korean society. To what extent it is deeply rooted in the national culture and to what extent it is a product of the political system, I am not in a position to judge. It is certainly something that the president has always been very keen to promote. These comments that he made in a speech delivered to the secretariat of the Central Committee in February 1973 are very typical:

‘The league organisations must ensure that the young people and children are dressed neatly in keeping with the socialist way of life."
At present, some members of the Children’s Union go about in slovenly clothes. This is because their parents do not take good care of them, but the main reason is that their schools and league organisations neglect their education and control. The schools and league organisations must improve the education of school children and tighten up their control so that all the school children must always go about neatly dressed.

‘Young people must always wear neat clothes. At present, some of them are careless about their clothes; they seem to think that a slovenly appearance is the sign of simplicity and frugality. Slovenly clothing is not a virtue of frugality. Young people must go about in good clothes and wear neckties and always dress themselves in clean clothes.

‘Young people and children must also keep the rules of hygiene thoroughly. The league organisations must ensure that they bathe themselves and have haircuts frequently, wash their feet before going to bed and brush their teeth every morning.’ (cw, Vol. 28, p. 203)

For anyone who finds the necessity for children to wash their feet before going to bed to be an unusual topic for the president of a republic of nearly twenty million people to be addressing at an elite gathering of one of the highest organs of state power, here is another delightful passage from the same speech:

‘The members of the Children’s Union must launch a campaign to eradicate flies, mosquitoes, and other harmful insects. On many occasions I have stressed the need for them to kill flies everywhere, but this work is not yet going well. The League and Children’s Union organisations must see that the union members carry out a general campaign to kill flies and mosquitoes and thus eradicate all harmful insects.’

For my first few days in hospital I was too unwell to be bored. It was sufficient to lie on a firm hospital mattress and feel no pain, to be able to get on and off my bed without too much difficulty or discomfort. By the end of a week I had revived sufficiently for tedium to set in. Apart from my daily trip to physiotherapy I did little except read, smoke on the balcony, or stand and stare uncomprehendingly at the tv. I did
receive occasional visits from my colleagues at the Ansan Chodasso, who also brought me fruit and chocolate to supplement the truly appalling hospital cuisine. But their visits tended to be short as the drivers were waiting and others might want the use of the car. There were always two or three cars on hand up to seven in the evening for the convenience of the revisers, but there were quite a few of us to share them and it was antisocial to monopolise them for much more than an hour at a time. In the halcyon days when revisers were less numerous and more cosseted, each reviser had a car and a driver at his personal disposal around the clock, but these days were long gone.

One morning during my second week in hospital I was out on the balcony having a cigarette under the clear azure sky of a Far-Eastern autumn, watching the leaves turn golden in the lofty birch trees, feeling thoroughly pissed off and cursing myself for landing in such a ridiculous situation, when a vision of loveliness suddenly appeared two balconies to my left. It was about five and a quarter feel tall with a luxuriant growth of long soft dark hair, full lips, laughing eyes, and carried itself with the sort of grace that made even the shapeless regulation issue striped hospital pyjamas look elegant. I smiled at the vision and the vision smiled back. I turned away wistfully. I did not speak Chinese.

It was a very pleasant surprise then when later that day the vision of loveliness presented herself at my door and asked in my own native tongue if she could come in. She was not only a singularly attractive girl, but remarkable in other ways too. Now aged twenty-three, she had been sent to Korea five years ago under a student exchange scheme to study agricultural engineering in Pyongyang. As well as mastering her subject, she had also obviously had to master first the Korean language, and she had also taught herself English in her own time through reading and practising conversation with the African students and any other foreigners she chanced to meet. She already spoke English pretty well and she was keen for me to help her improve it. I was very happy to oblige.

The last few days in hospital passed quite pleasantly. I did not spent the whole time with my new friend. The day after we met, she had the minor eye operation she had come in for and she needed to convalesce. I still had
to spend a lot of time lying on my back. But we spent time together each
day. I helped her improve her English while she generally charmed me
and opened my eyes a fraction to the culture of North-East Asia that sur-
rounded me. Our friendship seemed to cause some concern among the
hospital staff. Whenever we were in each other’s rooms, we seemed to get
more nursing attention than cardiac patients on an intensive care ward.

My friend was, and to a large extent remained, an enigma to me.
She was an exceptionally intelligent, self-assured and astute young lady,
but often when we were together I felt as if I was talking to one of my
thirteen-year-old daughter’s friends rather than to a young adult.

Her father was a scientist and university teacher in Beijing. Both her
parents, I gathered, were originally from privileged backgrounds. She
remarked that they had ‘such good lives before liberation’. As a small
child, she had been cared for in a residential nursery for six months while
her parents did their stint in the countryside as part of Chairman Mao’s
cultural revolution. Her parents had not relished the experiences. The
peasants were primitive and dirty people. Her father was often sick as a
consequence of the poor hygiene. When I asked if her father had a car,
she told me that he did not, ‘because although he is a professor, he is
not a party member’. She told me that when the family were obliged
to display Mao’s photograph in the living room, they had positioned
it as high up the wall as possible and seldom bothered to dust it. She
told me that much of the paraphernalia of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult
and political ideology was of Chinese derivation: the photographs, the
badges, the monuments and the concept of the three revolutions. Now,
as any good revolutionary warrior of Juche type will tell you, there is only
one Great Leader, ever-victorious, iron-willed and brilliant commander
in time of war, infinitely sagacious and far-sighted in time of peace, so
if there was any copying going on, it must have been on the part of the
Chinese. Not that this implies any criticism of the Chinese. It is a wise
man who emulates the uniquely great. Not being a revolutionary warrior
of Juche type, I did not contradict her. Sometimes she used to tease the
nurses by saying to them, ‘We used to have a Great Leader. All the time it
was Mao Ze Dong, he say this, Mao Ze Dong, he say that. Then he died.’
‘You must not say that’, they would hiss in genuine alarm.

Like, I suspect, most educated and relatively privileged young Chinese, she did not fundamentally oppose her country’s system but she was grateful for the changes that have been effected since Deng Xiao Ping has held the reins of power. Her father now earns four times as much as a porter at his university. Each member of her family, herself, her parents and her younger brother, have their own cassette recorder. The family has a colour TV. She is proud that her country can now manufacture such articles and no longer has to rely on importing them from Japan.

Her father no longer has to learn the newspaper by heart each day to be able to reiterate exactly the current party line, lest he be caught out at a group study session and lay himself open to criticism or even loss of position. She told me how once, when she was only eleven, her class were given a homework assignment to write a criticism of Deng Xiao Ping. She did not know how to proceed. She was only a small child. She knew nothing of politics or Deng Xiao Ping. She asked her mother’s assistance, but her mother was ignorant of these things also. Then her mother had the idea of finding a critical article in the newspaper and copying it out word for word.

Happily all the other parents of her classmates also had the same idea so nobody got into trouble. She held the opinion that if the staff at her university were able to devote less time to studying the Juche Idea and spend more time on scientific research, then the country might progress faster. Needless to say, no Korean student, no matter how gifted he may be at his subject, can hope to pass his course without passing the examinations in the Juche philosophy.

As well as the relaxation of ideological oppression by the party and the new consumerism for the more privileged classes, she also welcomed the advent of Western popular culture that was banned until a few years ago. She listened exclusively to Western pop music, but I am sad to say that her tastes were execrable. She adored a gruesome compilation of disco music that Jean-Jacques had brought back from a trip to Hong Kong which offered at best Mel and Kim’s Respectable and hit the pits with a number that went ‘Boom, boom, boom, let’s go back to my room
to have some boom, boom, boom’, while she decided to make a copy of my treasured selection of sixties Motown classics to give to her mother because ‘that sort of music is nice for older people’.

Although she was not enamoured of Pyongyang, she did not regret that she had been sent. She suffered from homesickness, particularly because she had only been able to return home once a year for the six-week summer holidays. She was incredulous when I told her that English students only attend college for thirty weeks and year and had both Saturday and Sunday free of classes. For her, coming to Pyongyang had been an adventure. She had never had the opportunity to travel even in her own country before. The first time she had left the environs of Beijing was to come to Pyongyang in 1982. She said that she had had more opportunities to talk to foreigners and learn English in Pyongyang than she would if she had stayed at home to study. And in Pyongyang she could go out in the evening. ‘My daddy say: must not go out after dark. Many bad people about. In Pyongyang bad Koreans also but they dare not do anything. Is different in my country. Many, many people. Cannot control them.’

It was interesting to hear her talk about food. Food is not something that we in the West give a lot of thought to. Our conversation is not peppered with allusions to the subject of food. Clearly even for the relatively well-off in socialist Asia, food is a major preoccupation. Even if one is not personally experiencing scarcity, the possibility of scarcity is never remote. ‘Always at home we have very good food. My daddy he say you can have to eat whatever you like.’ Although on this occasion she actually did require medical treatment, she told me that she had been in the hospital five times before. She said that she pretended to be unwell because if she spent a few days in hospital, she received large quantities of free food and she could then claim a rebate from the student’s hostel for the meals she had not taken there. This helped to augment her meagre spending allowance. She told me that when she went home and got a job, she would continue to live with her parents and give all her money to her mother because that way she would be sure to have plenty to eat. It was through talking to her that I first discovered how frugal was the
diet of the Koreans around me. Rice or maize, a little pickled vegetables, and soup if they are lucky, three times a day. Meat, except a little to flavour the soup, was for festival occasions. A bar of chocolate or a packet of biscuits was a rare extravagance. The day that she was discharged from hospital, she told me that she had been to the Pyongyang Shop, the biggest store for foreigners which accepts both blue and red won, to buy presents for the nurses. This was a typically kind-hearted gesture because I doubt if her monthly spending allowance would have been any more than fifty blue won. I assumed that she had bought them sweets or biscuits or something like that. No, she had bought them vegetables. Not even vegetables are available in ample quantities. This is not to say that anybody in North Korea goes hungry. It is not that sort of place. Almost the entire population has the same relentless diet: a ration of grain, preferably rice, soup, a little pickled cabbage or radishes, washed down with hot water. Coffee is way beyond their price range. Nor can they afford to drink tea or soft drinks except occasionally. People cannot always be bothered to boil the water, so colitis is endemic in Pyongyang. Quite a few adult males desist from drinking alcohol when they have the opportunity because alcohol exacerbates the condition and causes stomach-ache.

One day while I was in her room she received a visit from a slightly older Korean woman. She was one of the guides who look after the foreign students and are at the same time expected to keep a watchful eye on them. What made her remarkable was her clothes. She was not wearing a low-cut dress or a miniskirt or anything like that. I fancy it will be a few years yet before any such garment is seen on a North Korean woman. The style of her clothes was conventionally plain and modest. She was wearing knitted tights, a pair of plain leather shoes with a low heel, a raincoat, a skirt of just below knee-length, and a jumper; but she also had a pale blue silk scarf tied round her neck and every one of her garments declaimed by their texture and cut that they had not been manufactured locally. They had either been purchased abroad or at one of the local
dollar shops where the prices of imported clothes is astronomical. When I commented on this, my friend explained with a certain amount of awe in her voice that this young lady’s father was a very high government official, ‘only just below the president,’ she added. ‘I have been to her house. It is in one of the new blocks near the Koryo. There are five rooms for one family.’

This was interesting. I did not know at that time that that section of Changgwant Street, a block away from the Koryo, which is closed to the general public, contains apartments of the central committee, so I never ascertained whether she meant that this young lady’s family lived there or in one of the modern apartment blocks adjacent to the Koryo. Assuming that the lady’s father was quite elevated but not quite of central committee standing, and that it was in the latter, publicly visible housing that the family resided, this would confirm my impression that North Korea is a genuinely pretty egalitarian society. From what I could see, the occupants of these flats enjoyed no higher a standard of living than an affluent working-class family living in one of Britain’s more desirable council estates might realistically aspire to. Although the quality of this young woman’s attire stood out in Pyongyang, in Europe she would have passed as just an ordinary young professional woman. There is a wide gap between the standard of living enjoyed by the occupants of this class of accommodation and the occupants of the tiled cottages. On the other hand, this gap cannot be compared to the gulf that divides the Rolls Royce owners in Britain from the destitute seeking shelter at the Salvation Army.

Because one cannot see, one can only speculate on how the central committee are living. The fact that they live in apartments in the city centre and not in villas in the country may give some indication. Similarly one has to speculate as to how the country people are living in the rural areas where foreigners are not normally taken. However, visiting experts and technicians who have had to be taken off the beaten track for the sake of their projects invariably report that living conditions are quite reasonable by the standards of rural Asia. For example, one agriculturalist was taken to the extreme north of the country near the Soviet border
to a remote area where it was wintry for nearly two-thirds of the year, and in the depths of January, such fierce winds prevailed that although it was frequently snowing the snow never settled. To provide maximum shelter for themselves the people built their houses half underground. Even up there electrification had been introduced and there were schools and medical services, not to mention badges and photographs of the leadership.

It should be remembered in judging today’s communist societies that they neither claim to have achieved complete equality of wealth nor aspire to achieve it in the immediate future. These societies subscribe to the ideology that they are in the transitional phase of socialism when the dictatorship of the proletariat holds sway, that marks the passage from capitalism to communism proper. Their immediate aims are the exploitation of labour and the elimination of institutionalised class distinctions and privileges. Over twenty years ago Kim Il Sung made his view plain that the dictatorship of the proletariat must continue in the DPRK until the country’s productive forces have reached an advanced stage, the peasantry has attained the same levels of affluence and cultural attainments as the urban working class, and all traces of obsolete ideologies have been eradicated from the minds of individuals. And even when a totally classless and technologically developed society has been created, ‘while ever the revolution has not brought victory on a worldwide scale’ and ‘as long as capitalism remains in the world’, then ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat will not vanish, and we cannot even talk about the disappearance of the state’. (cw, Vol. 21, p. 226)

Sounds like he is anticipating a long reign for the Kim dynasty. In the meantime, according to Kim Jong II, it is ‘the socialist principle of distribution according to the quality and quantity of work done’ that should be applied. He modifies this by adding that ‘neglecting the political and moral incentive and placing the main emphasis on the material incentive runs counter to the essential character of socialist society’ and is ‘a very dangerous and harmful tendency’, which ‘fosters selfishness among the working people and makes them mercenary and acquisitive’. (On the Juche Idea, p. 69)
CHAPTER NINE

After two weeks in hospital I returned to the Ansan Chodasso, still in very considerable discomfort which only abated very gradually over the course of the next four or five weeks. It was now November. Autumn had passed into winter. The year’s last tourists had vacated the hotels.

For the first week after my discharge I returned to the hospital each morning for heat treatment, after which I would slip up to visit my friend for a few minutes. We continued to see each other after she left the hospital, but, like so many aspects of life in Pyongyang, it was not easy.

When she first arrived in Pyongyang five years previously, the Chinese students were all warned by their embassy that they were not to associate with any foreigners apart from fellow students. They were told that to do so would give offence to the Koreans, who were concerned lest the students should divulge to foreigners information about life in Korea that they did not wish foreigners to know.

In actual fact, as I knew from contacts with the veteran African students and others, life in the DPRK had become a lot more liberal in many respects since she first arrived. Even Michael, who had only arrived in Pyongyang a month before I did, had noticed changes. The interpreters were no longer wary of approaching foreigners to whom they were not officially attached. The girls behind the bars were no longer reluctant to play tapes of Western pop music on the cassette recorders. I very much doubt if in the prevailing climate any Korean would have taken the slightest interest in our relationship. Apart from anything else, it would have been pointless for the Koreans to take active steps to discourage Chinese students from associating with foreigners when they were unable to place such restrictions on the Africans, who had far more access to the places frequented by foreigners on account of their greater spending power, and who all knew a European language. Basically I think her fears that there could be serious repercussions if she was seen with me by anyone from her embassy or anyone who knew her and might report her were groundless. Nevertheless, the fears were there, and the
fact that she only had a few weeks to go in Pyongyang did nothing to diminish them. The prospect of being sent home in disgrace without a qualification at this late stage was not appealing. One night she got in a dreadful panic. We had deliberately chosen to go to the Potanggang in preference to the Koryo to reduce the risk of being seen. What should be parked just beside the entrance to the hotel but a Chinese embassy car with a driver inside. It was too late to turn back but, after seeking a brief refuge in the disco bar, we left again a few minutes later, separately, she with her woolly hat pulled down almost over her eyes and her coat collar turned up as far as it would go.

We still managed to spend a few pleasant evenings together. Every few days as often as she was free and felt able to go out from the hostel to meet me without attracting suspicion, she would ring me up. Even the phone calls contained an element of absurdity. The telephone was in the interpreters’ quarters. Neither of the resident interpreters at that time spoke much English. It would have been simple for her to speak to them in Korean but she feared that to do so might offer a clue to her identity. Therefore she would only ask to speak to me in English. Until they became familiar with her voice, this led to some confusion. We would meet in the evening on Changgwant Street and go to a restaurant which she considered relatively safe because it only accepted red won and Chinese diplomats only had blue. Or we would take a chance and venture into the hotels. On one occasion we went to the disco at the Changgwangsan. Although there were only a handful of people there, she was quite delighted because she had never been to a real, grownup discothèque before. The next time we went, we arrived to find that the barman had just closed it because there had been no customers that night. Such is the way of things in wintry Pyongyang.

Shortly before Christmas she returned to her country for good. A few days earlier my close friend Sami had migrated south for the winter. That was when life became really dull.
My mood as I settled down to endure the long, cold, dreary Korean winter was not improved by something that happened in early December, December 5th to be exact.

Pay day was always the fifth of the month. That was when I found out that I was not going to be paid for the two weeks I spent in hospital. When I mentioned this to Sami, he confirmed that this was their normal practice. He said the same thing had happened to a previous reviser who had had a drink problem and had several spells in hospital as a result. Sami had not forewarned me about this but I did not hold it against him. I had already realised that it is a characteristic of people who spend a long time in North Korea that they end up being almost as guarded about giving information as the Koreans themselves.

Coming on top of my early hassle over money, I was furious, particularly as this was just after Black Monday and the collapse of the dollar. It was just as well I was not on the other side of the 38th parallel within reach of a nuclear button that day. I would have solved what they call ‘the two Koreas problem’ and put an end to the tensions on the Korean peninsula once and for all. There would have been just Korea, and it would have been an island with its northern coastline hugging the 38th parallel.

Ψ

Christmas was a particularly dreary time. Pyongyang had already been dead for weeks. In the middle of December they even started to close my favourite bar in the Potanggang Hotel at 7:30 in the evening because of lack of custom. Perversely they did not shut down the disco bar, where the Western disco music blared unheeded and the coloured lights dazzled nobody except the two girls who sat in weary solitude behind the counter night after night, even though hardly anyone frequented it at the best of times. The only inhabited place left to go was the Koryo where one was not guaranteed to meet anyone except the sturdy German engineers marooned in the basement.

Sami had departed. Michael had gone home to England to spend the holiday period with his parents. Jean-Jacques had flown off to
Beijing. The monotonous daily routine of trying to render into lucid and intelligent English prose the most unsalvageable rubbish went on. The food went through one of its periodic depressions when the fish, chicken and meat they gave us to augment the staple rice and soup and the pickled vegetables I could no longer look at were of poor quality. For the first time in my life on Christmas Day I worked all day, left the meal table hungry, and spent the evening alone while the machinery in the factory next door rattled on regardless.

There was some festive celebration of the new year. On December 30th, we had a banquet at the Ansan Chodasso. Our little waitresses put on their best uniforms. One of the Deputy Directors from the publishing house came and made a speech. As usual we all had to take it in turns to stand up and sing a little song. I drank copious quantities of Pyongyangsul (Korean vodka) and beer and attempted to stave off famine by nibbling slices of dry bread as I waited in the forlorn hope that in among all these lavish dishes of unpalatable Korean food, they might bring something I could eat.

New Year’s Day was a public holiday. My head of department, always a welcome guest, called round for a pre-lunch drink. Later that day I sat amid the depopulated luxury of the Koryo Hotel with a couple of Africans and we talked like prisoners discussing their sentences about how long we had been in Korea and how much more time we had to do.

A few days later we were given an outing when we were taken to the February 8th Theatre to see the annual children’s show. Whenever we were to go anywhere we were not usually told until the day before. The Korean custom of keeping people in the dark up to the last possible moment is extended to foreigners as well. On this occasion the Koreans excelled themselves. I was given ten minutes’ notice and five of them were taken up by the French-speaking interpreter trying to get through to me that I was about to see something to do with children, that, no, the children would not be coming here, I would have to put my coat on and go to them, and yes, it was ‘ce matin, oui, maintenant, dix minutes’.

The children’s show turned out to be a most charming spectacle. If this spectacular variety show had been performed by adults, it would
have been impressive. Performed by children, it was amazing. The ages of these dancers, musicians, singers and acrobats ranged from about four to sixteen. Many of the star solo artistes were as young as nine or ten. Yet they performed dances of such complexity that they might almost have been choreographed by Busby Berkeley with the precision of a Broadway chorus. They played their instruments and sang superbly. They displayed poise and assurance and exuded an innocent sweetness that was not the least bit fey or self-conscious. I had gone with the attitude that it would be better than working. I came away wishing it could have gone on for hours.

Simone kindly sat beside me and interpreted the proceedings for me. Like everything else in North Korea, the more you understood what was going on, the more ludicrous it became. For example, one delightful song and dance sequence turned out to be a celebration of how wonderful life would be when the massive new Sunchon Vindon Complex is operational and everyone has lots of new clothes to wear. It ended with the Great Leader’s avuncular image projected onto a screen on the back of the stage and all the children curtseying to him and expressing their gratitude for his munificence in making this miracle possible. The magical world of childhood lives on a new socialist dimension with an original Juche-oriented slant on the archetype of the Fairy Godmother.

Simone was as impressed with the performance as I was but she had seen previous years’ productions and could not help feeling a little nostalgic. When she first came to Pyongyang and diplomats and foreigners generally were thinner on the ground than they are today, then the revisers used to attend the gala New Year’s Eve performance, which the president himself traditionally attends, and came away with gilt-edged souvenir programmes. Now the revisers are in the process of being working-classized, to use a favourite DPRK concept, and have to make do with a matinee performance along with a lot of school parties. Personally, I rather liked it that way.
They sent one of the translators from the publishing house to the New Year banquet at the Ansan Chodasso to translate the Deputy Director’s speech to me. During the course of the meal he suddenly announced, à propos of nothing, ‘The greatest sorrow in my life is that my country is divided.’ My initial impulse was to smile and say something on the lines of, ‘Now steady on, old chap, I’m not too keen on the way my country’s going at the moment but it doesn’t do to take these things personally.’ I restrained myself because he was a nice man and I sensed that he really did feel his country’s misfortune as a personal tragedy.

Koreans generally seem to be a pretty nationalistic lot. I have read that the people in South Korea too entertain passionate feelings about an eventual reunification of their country. If nationalistic fervour is an innate trait in the Korean character, it is also something which the North’s propaganda machine cultivates for all it is worth. Night after night the TV screens are filled with pictures of South Korean students demonstrating on the streets and chucking petrol bombs at the riot police. It does not matter if the students have been quiescent for a few weeks. There is plenty of footage from the summer of ’87. The cameras linger on scenes of police beating up protesters, scenes that are genuinely shocking to the citizens in the North, where outbursts of aggression are exceptionally rare. Day after day from childhood the populace are reminded about the terrible calamity of national division that has been inflicted on them by the US imperialist aggressor and has the compatriots in the South eke out meagre lives of poverty and servitude under the yoke of the US colonial rule and the fascist repression of the puppet military dictatorship. Day after day they are told that it is the most ardent desire of every Korean to see his country reunified. I suppose if people are told often enough that this is or ought to be their most ardent desire, it is not surprising if a lot of them take it all very much to heart.

As is well known, the first attempt by the North to achieve reunification was by force of arms. Needless to say, the North claims that it was the other side that started the war. If that were the case, the North must have had its counter-attack very well prepared. Hostilities commenced on June 25th 1950. On June 28th, the Korean People’s Army entered Seoul.
When three years later the Korean War ended in a stalemate, the North pinned its hopes on rapid economic development. The idea was that the North would become more prosperous and the people in the South would be overcome with envy. Then they would rise up and overthrow their government, expel the Yankees, and demand to be taken into the fatherly embrace of the Great Leader. As Kim Il Sung put it in 1954, ‘An important condition for achieving the reunification and independence of our country is to consolidate the economic basis of the northern half of the Republic, make the people’s life more bountiful and turn the North into a prosperous land of bliss. There is no doubt that when our economy and culture develop and the people live more happily, the people in the southern half suffering from hunger and groping in the dark will hate more and more the us imperialists and the Syngman Rhee traitors and rise up against them and will trust more deeply and follow our Party and the Government of our Republic. Then the question of national reunification and independence will be easily solved’ (cw, Vol. 9, p. 19). Brave words from a head of state who at that time presided over little more than a ragged and hungry populace dwelling among charred rubble and burnt-out fields.

Ten years later, in a speech delivered at the Eighth Plenary Meeting of the Fourth Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, he was advocating a more directly interventionist approach to stirring up the laggardy southerners, presumably by means of intensified propaganda, infiltration, and setting up underground organisations. I have to say presumably because the final section of this speech carries the heading ‘On Concrete Ways to Reunify the Country’, but all it says underneath the heading is ‘Contents Omitted’. Clearly at that time there was a quite definite and open commitment to exporting the revolution south, although one can only speculate as to how extreme the methods were that he was recommending.

In recent years the official stance has modified somewhat. For almost a decade there has been a proposal on the table from the North that Korea should be reunified under a confederal system and that the reunified country should be rechristened the Democratic Confederal Republic of
Koryo. It is proposed that under this system a central government body composed of equal representatives from both sides would determine issues of foreign policy and defence, while either side would exercise regional autonomy and retain its existing political system and ideology. This sounds an eminently fair, if impractical, proposal. One could make out a case that it is not as impractical as it first sounds on the basis that North Korea is a committed member of the non-aligned movement and has a commendable record of upholding its political independence when this has sometimes meant keeping both its powerful communist neighbours at arm’s length, even at the sacrifice of much-needed economic and technical assistance. How serious the North is, or ever was, about this proposal is another question. It may have been serious in 1980. In 1988 South Korea is a newly industrialised country with one of the world’s fastest growing economies. Corporations like Hyundai, Daewoo, Samsung and Sosangyang have emerged as major forces in the international marketplace. In 1987, South Korea had an international trade surplus of getting on for ten billion dollars. In the same year, according to Time magazine (5/9/1988), North Korea imported ‘2.1 billion dollars’ worth of machinery, oil and other necessities largely from the Soviet Union, and shipped out 1.5 billion dollars’ worth of minerals, clothing and seafood’. North Korea’s economy is strictly small time and running at a loss. As yet the fruits of the new-found prosperity may not have filtered down to the common man in South Korea but living standards are rising and will almost certainly continue to do so. It is equally likely that North Korean living standards will remain rooted in third-world poverty, albeit a well managed poverty, for the foreseeable future. The more the economic gulf widens between South and North, and is reflected in workers’ living standards, the less the North can afford North–South contacts, let alone reunification, if it wishes to maintain its present system. The time is coming if it has not already arrived when it is the people in the North would be likely to become disaffected if they knew how the other half lived.

Meanwhile the North Koreans continue to do everything they can to promote the illusion that everything on their side of the 38th parallel is
wonderful, in the hope that some people in the North will believe them. They continue to tell their people that the reason they have to work so hard for so little is to make their economy so prosperous that the people in the South will rise up in revolt to be reunited with them, and then they will all suddenly lead affluent lives. Also the North in no way modified the confrontational attitudes expressed in its propaganda in response to the political changes that took place in South Korea during the time I was in Pyongyang.

In the summer of 1987 the South Korean dictator, Chun Doo Hwan, succumbed to public pressure at home and diplomatic pressure from his US sponsors to allow democratic elections to be held later that year. The candidate for Chun’s Democratic Justice Party, his long time friend and colleague Roh Tae Woo, was elected president on December 16th, 1987, with thirty-six per cent of the vote. Neutral observers were in agreement that Roh’s supporters boosted his share of the vote through fraudulent practices, but not sufficiently to affect the overall result. Roh was able to scrape home because the two principal opposition leaders, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jong, could not agree on a united platform and so split the opposition vote. In February 1988, Roh’s power base was eroded when his party failed to secure a majority of seats in the elections of candidates for the South Korean parliament. Although Roh was undoubtedly party to the political repression and abuses of human rights perpetrated by the Chun regime, since his election he has given every indication of having adopted a genuinely more liberal and democratic attitude. There is a theory that he is only maintaining this attitude to ensure a peaceful social climate for the Olympic Games and that he will afterwards revert to dictatorial type. From what I have read, though, the reality in South Korea seems to be that events have moved too far forward for him to do that if he wanted to, unless some quite exceptional situation arose. These changes in the South have not been reflected in the North’s propaganda, which is still all about the traitor Roh Tae Woo and his puppet fascist clique who are manipulated by the US imperialists who wish to maintain South Korea as their colony to serve American economic interests and as bridgehead for aggression in Asia. In July 1988, Roh announced a
new policy towards the North. From now on the South would actively try to bring the North out of its isolation. South Korean history books would be rewritten with a softer anti-communist bias. He proposed cultural and economic exchanges. Japan, at Seoul's request, offered to set up a trade mission in Pyongyang. Kim Woo Choong, the chairman of the Daewoo Corporation, stated that his company had already built a refrigerator factory in China and would be happy to set a precedent for other South Korean firms by building factories in the North. The North was not interested, which suggests to me that the Kim dynasty is more concerned with maintaining Juche than achieving either prosperity or national reunification except on its own terms.

In spite of its economic difficulties, North Korea continues to invest 25% of its gross national product in the military. There are at least three-quarters of a million in the armed services and in 1988 it took delivery of advanced Soviet missiles and war planes, including top of the MiG-29’s. It would be wrong to necessarily assume from this that North Korea is currently harbouring thoughts about another southward invasion. The South Korean armed forces are numerically smaller at 629,000. They are estimated to have only approximately half the North’s 2,900 tanks and 6,000 artillery pieces. However, their equipment is generally more sophisticated and they are augmented by 40,000 US troops with a nuclear arsenal of no less than a thousand warheads. It could equally be assumed that the North feels compelled to maintain its arms buildup to safeguard itself against an invasion from the South. Every year since 1976, South Korean and American troops have staged a joint military exercise known as Team Spirit. From modest beginnings, Team Spirit has grown each year until now it is of two months’ duration and involves over 200,000 servicemen. In content, it amounts to a full-scale rehearsal for an invasion of the North, complete with tactical nuclear strikes. In a tense situation where there are always frequent incidents along the demilitarised zone, for which each side always blames the other, should such an exercise be classed as a reasonable deterrent or an adventurist provocation? Even if one accepts that it is intended to be the former, one should not be surprised if the North evinces a high degree of paranoia.
Having said that North Korea harbours no intentions at the moment of invading the South, that is not to say that it may not do so in the future. At present the northern masses are content with their simple lifestyle and united in their worship of the Great Leader. Kim Il Sung has proved himself no fool. He is not about to do anything reckless. If, however, over the next few years living standards decline rather than improve, which is quite possible, and should the Great Leader prove mortal and the Dear Leader have difficulty in sustaining his father’s hold over the masses, both of which are likely, then a desperate and erratic response to a perceived external threat in order to hold internal dissent in check cannot be ruled out. Whether this justifies a continued American military presence in South Korea is open to question. One may not approve of what America has been up to in Korea over the last forty-odd years. In the name of democracy, they have sponsored a succession of authoritarian dictatorships. Nevertheless, under these tyrannical regimes, South Korea has prospered. The aspirations of the people are for the sort of Western-style democracy they have recently achieved. What pro-communist sympathies remain in South Korea are largely fuelled by resentment at American domination over South Korean affairs. In the event of armed hostilities between the two Koreas, the military usefulness of American troops to the South could be cancelled out by the adverse political effect they could have on the internal situation. If Americans were participating on active service in another Korean war, and even commanding the South Korean army, the North would be asking the South Koreans whose war they thought they were fighting and there would be bound to be some who would be susceptible to the implied line of reasoning. It would certainly be in nobody’s long term interests for the Americans to employ nuclear weapons against North Korea. The North has only half the population of the South. It is far behind technologically and economically. It would be most unlikely to obtain active support for an armed conflict from either the Soviet Union or China. Even its numerically vast army should not be overrated. Putting undernourished peasants into uniforms and setting them to build factories is unlikely to produce top quality fighting men for modern, technological warfare.
Therefore, it would have very little chance of winning prolonged war against the South, unless the South were undermined from within by widespread dissent. On the other hand, the North Koreans might well prove fanatical foes who would not easily be swept aside. If they obtained some early victories, there would inevitably be a temptation to resort to nuclear weapons to stop them, particularly if there was a danger of some of the nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea falling otherwise in to the hands of an advancing North Korean army. The possible repercussions of nuclear weapons exploding on the doorstep of both Russia and China does not bear thinking about.

On the assumption that the main reason American nuclear weapons are deployed in South Korea is to contain the ‘Soviet menace’, then this purpose could be served just as well if they were relocated in Japan, which is unified, stable, prosperous, committed to capitalism and already in the process of becoming a junior partner in the Star Wars programme. I am not saying that America should discontinue military support to South Korea, but that nuclear weapons are quite inappropriate in the situation, and that actual involvement of American troops on the peninsula may soon be counter-productive.

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Northern paranoia reached a fever pitch in early 1988, when a renewed request for talks on arms limitation was rejected by the South side, which levelled accusations that the North had been responsible for the disappearance over the Thai-Burma borer of a Korean Airlines passenger plane, with a hundred and forty people on board, in November 1987. This was followed by the announcement of sanctions against the North by the United States and Japan.

North Korea has been no stranger to terrorist activity in the past. There was the notorious bombing incident in the Burmese capital of Rangoon in 1983, when four visiting South Korean ministers were killed. Pyongyang is widely reputed to supply funds to the Japanese Red Army. Whether it was really responsible for the disappearance of the \textit{KAL} plane
remains debatable. The wreckage of the plane was never found. It was suspected that a couple travelling on Japanese passports, who left the plane at Dubai, may have planted a bomb. The man committed suicide before he could be questioned. The woman was brought to Seoul for questioning in a blaze of publicity on the day before the South Korean presidential elections. She did not resurface until January, when she made a public confession at a press conference that she was a North Korean agent, and had planted a bomb on the plane on the instructions of Kim Jong Il.

There were several aspects of the woman’s confession and the South Korean explanation of the incident in general that were not entirely convincing. Even if the woman really was a North Korean or a sympathiser with the North and had planted a bomb, there were reasons for thinking it unlikely that she was acting on official instructions from Pyongyang. The timing for such an outrage could hardly seem less in keeping with North Korean interests. The first democratic elections in years were about to be held in the South. The reactionary candidate and close associate of Chun Doo Hwa, Roh Tae Woo, was by no means certain of winning. Much of his appeal was based on the fear of the communist threat and his reputation as an intractable opponent of communism. Nothing could better serve his electoral cause than a terrorist outrage on the eve of the elections which could be laid at the North’s door. If he did not win, both the leading opposition figures, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jong, were essentially centrist. Neither of them were about to hand over the keys of Seoul to Kim Il Sung. But they could be expected to adopt a more conciliatory attitude to the North, to be more amenable to talks and contacts with a view to possible eventual reunification, in fact, to hold out the sort of olive branches that Roh Tae Woo started to dangle in the summer of 1988.

In view of Pyongyang’s response to Roh’s overtures, one wonders if the North might in fact have deliberately arranged a terrorist atrocity on the eve of the elections precisely because it did not want a more sympathetic government in power in the South. In many ways, a US-sponsored fascistic dictatorship in Seoul was in the Kim dynasty’s interests. While
Chun Doo Hwan was denying the South Korean people basic democratic rights and imprisoning dissenters without trial and condoning torture, Pyongyang could claim the high moral ground in the international arena. While the South Korean stance towards the North remained one of outright antagonism and confrontation, Kim Il Sung could more easily justify the imposition of austerity and military discipline in the North’s civilian population on grounds of national security. While the South side refused to enter into reasonable dialogue and dragged its feet on promoting mutual contacts and exchanges, the North had some justification for adopting a similar attitude. And the less contact the people in the North have with the people in the South, the simpler it is to lie to them.

However, at the time when the South was accusing the North of blowing up the passenger plane, it seemed at face value as if this was the last thing the North would want to do at such a time. Northern reaction to the accusations was angry and voluble. I was deluged with articles and speeches to revise about the missing airliner incident. Sadly, not one of them contained an intelligent refutation of the charges. Not one of them pointed out that it might have been against the North’s interests to have done such a thing. Not one of them offered a coherent demolition of the South’s rather flimsy evidence, or went on to castigate the South Korean authorities for irresponsible opportunism, for trying to make political capital out of a tragic air disaster. Instead there were wild counter-accusations that the treacherous Chun Doo Hwan–Roh Tae Woo puppet clique, at the instigation of their US masters, had blown up the plane themselves so that they could then turn round and blame the North. These totally unsubstantiated accusations were accompanied by a lot of sabre-rattling rhetoric. Some of it was so belligerent that I experienced a physical revulsion in revising it.

Here is an extract from one of the more sober effusions of that time, a press statement issued by O Jin U, the Minister of the Armed Forces, on January 27th.

‘A desperate situation has been created on the Korean peninsula in which some slight accidental factor could easily precipitate a nuclear war.
The Korean people are entering a crucial phase where they are balanced on a knife edge between peace and nuclear war.

‘In this dire situation when the nation stands at the crossroads between a life of peace and the havoc of a nuclear holocaust, it is absolutely vital that all Koreans rise up in the nation-saving struggle to prevent a nuclear war.

‘However, the South Korean rulers, utterly indifferent to the destiny of the country and the nation, are zealously assisting the US imperialists in their moves to provoke a nuclear war that would bring immeasurable calamities to the whole nation. They are imploring the Americans for the protection of their “nuclear umbrella” and for a permanent occupation by their aggressor forces. Worse still, they are taking an active part in the US imperialists’ large scale nuclear war exercises directed against their fellow countrymen.

‘The criminal acts of the South Korean puppet clique are unpardonable treacheries intended to draw the whole country into the US imperialists’ nuclear war shambles and sacrifice our nation as victims to their nuclear war.

‘I, on behalf of the entire Korean people and the officers and men of the People’s Army, vehemently denounce the thrice-cursed nuclear war moves of the US imperialists and the South Korean puppet clique, who, having converted the entire territory of South Korea into a nuclear base, are seeking to inflict a nuclear catastrophe upon our nation. There are no grounds whatsoever for the United States to ship nuclear weapons into South Korea.

‘The whole world knows that there are no nuclear weapons in the northern half of the Republic.

‘If the nuclear weapons deployed by the United States in South Korea are in reality aimed at other socialist countries, then the US imperialists ought to withdraw them now that they have concluded a nuclear disarmament treaty with the Soviet Union.

‘The Korean peninsula must be converted into a nuclear-free peace zone to meet the aspirations of all the Korean people and other peace-loving peoples of the world.
'The us imperialists and the bellicose elements of South Korea should acquaint themselves with the miserable ends of all previous war maniacs who have had a fondness for playing with fire.

‘If the us imperialists and the South Korean puppet rulers think that they can frighten anyone with nuclear weapons, they are making a serious miscalculation.

‘The us imperialists must withdraw from South Korea at once, taking all their nuclear weapons and forces of aggression with them, before it is too late.

‘The Chun Doo Hwan–Roh Tae Woo group must cease to act as servants to the us nuclear war machine. They must desist from further acts of criminal treachery that are liable to lead to the extermination of their fellow countrymen. They should accede to the demands of the people and step down from power without delay.

‘The Korean people and the officers and men of the People’s Army will continue to keep watch with increased vigilance on the reckless manoeuvres of the us imperialists and South Korea puppet clique to provoke nuclear war. They will respond to any acts of enemy aggression with a thousandfold retaliation.’

O Jin U occupies an interesting place in the North Korean hierarchy. Officially he is one of only three members of the presidium of the politburo of the central committee, the highest organ of government which makes all major policy decisions. The other two members of course are Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Whether he is now able to exert any active influence on decisions is highly debatable. He evidently had ideas of his own at one time, because in November 1976, he was the victim of one of the legendary Pyongyang ‘road accidents’ which was almost certainly arranged for him by his two colleagues in the presidium. He sustained serious injuries in the crash but survived. He was packed off to Eastern Europe for medical treatment. Incredibly, after his recovery he was allowed to resume his position, presumably having learned his lesson and promised the fatherly leader to be a good boy in future.

I have quoted from his statement at some length because it is a fair sample of North Korean rhetoric. Very fair, in fact. The usual standard
is much worse. Can such a senior minister seriously equate a doubtful accusation of terrorism with a provocation to all-out war? Does he really expect this sort of outburst to attract the sympathy and support of the peace-loving people of the world? As far as I can see, his tone of hysteria, his call for ‘all Koreans’ to ‘rise up in the nation-saving struggle to prevent a nuclear war’ and the threat to ‘respond to any acts of enemy aggression with a thousandfold retaliation’ can only confirm the official South Korean view that the North is still a highly erratic and dangerous foe, bent at the very least on fomenting insurrection, and lend justification to the continued American military presence in the South.

One cannot help wondering whether this sort of muddled hysteria is merely representative of what high ministers of state in the DPRK regard as effective propaganda, or whether they actually think like this. The latter is a disturbing possibility and a very real one. In a society where so much power is invested in one person that no point of view other than his is permissible, where all critical thinking is suppressed in favour of the parroting of received ideas, and where advancement is dependent on conformity to those ideas, it is conceivable that even the occupants of highest office are incapable in thought or speech of doing more than parroting the ideas and rhetoric of their Great Leader. This would help account for the stupidity that prevails in all spheres of activity in North Korea today, and explain why the country is in decline.

I could not help smiling at the unconscious irony when I came across this passage in a talk the president delivered to Spanish journalists in 1980. ‘To establish Juche in ideology means, in short, being conscious that one is the master and acquiring the idea and viewpoint of participating in the revolution and construction of one’s own country with the attitude of a master. If one fails to establish Juche in ideology, one’s independent cognitive faculty will be diminished so that one will be unable to display any creativity and end up following implicitly without discerning between right and wrong. If one loses originality like this, one will, in the end, make a mess of the revolution and construction.’
The high spot of January was Michael’s return from holiday in England with a number of letters for me. David Richardson had warned me that receipt of mail could be a problem. His warning proved well founded. In my first four months in Korea, I received through the mail two bank statements, two birthday cards without letters enclosed, one postcard and two personal letters. It was fully three months before I received any news of my family. I tried to adopt a philosophical attitude. I told myself that if I had chosen as my life’s big adventure to float up the Amazon in a canoe, I might have had exactly the same problems and a few other minor inconveniences besides. Unfortunately I could not stop myself from worrying.

Before Michael left for England, I gave him a dozen letters to post for me. In some I enclosed the address of his parents in Warwickshire so that people could send letters there and Michael could bring them back with him. It was a lovely warm feeling to learn that all the people I cared most about were alive and well and still thinking about me. It was distressing to think that it might be months before I hear from them again. In my last eight months in Korea I received another bank statement, three postcards, and one solitary letter.

It would have been possible to telephone, but the expense was prohibitive. International calls still had to be booked in advance and put through the operator, and the charge per minute was about treble the cost of a comparable call made in the UK.

Incongruously, it would seem that the vast majority of the letters that I sent out reached their destination, although I am told there was sometimes a couple of weeks’ gap between the date on the letter and the date on the postmark. One would have thought that the censors would be more concerned with outgoing than incoming information. The only vaguely logical explanation I can think of why the North Koreans deprive foreign residents of news from home is that they think it might distract them from their work, and it has never occurred to them that
people might actually function better when they have the reassurance that everything is all right at home. Logic, however, is not a North Korean strong point, and there may well be some other quite bizarre explanation.

I was not alone in being deprived of mail. At the time I left, the American who was teaching English at the Foreign Languages University had received nothing for eight months. A West German telecommunications engineer who spent three and a half months commissioning a new direct dial international telephone link – thirty-two lines for the entire country – received no letters in that time. I was never quite able to ascertain what the situation was with the other revisers. The revisers from the socialist countries had no problem because they received their mail through their embassies. My colleagues from the capitalist world tended to be reticent about discussing their mail situation. It is the sort of thing people in Pyongyang become cagey about. They all wanted to remain in Pyongyang and their underlying fear was that Andrew Holloway might risk getting himself sent home by making insinuations to the Koreans that they were behaving in an underhand and dishonourable fashion, so if he did, he was not going to be able to drag anyone else’s name in as well. I suppose it is the hallmark of an efficient totalitarian system that individuals regulate themselves according to the unwritten rules and become furtive and quiescent of their own accord.

As well as the letters Michael brought back other wondrous gifts, recent copies of the *Guardian* and the *Observer*. No foreign newspapers, books or magazines, not even from other communist countries, are on sale in Pyongyang. I was not totally out of touch with world events. Jean-Jacques had the weekend edition of the *International Herald Tribune* sent to him every week. He also used to bring back from his trips to China English language periodicals like *South*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Newsweek*. Still, it was good to read an English newspaper again, even if the news was uniformly bad. Newcastle were once again floundering in the lower reaches of the first division. World cricket was falling apart. Not only had Mike Gatting in Pakistan behaved in a manner that would have once been unthinkable for an English cricket captain, but he had subsequently received official backing. I could not help wondering how
the RCCB would have reacted if it had been Tony Greig or Ian Botham who had behaved so disgracefully. Viv Richards had been tarnishing his legend in Calcutta. And Mrs Thatcher was about to demolish another bastion of fair play and civic decency by abolishing the rates and introducing her notorious poll tax.

I was appalled by a commentator in the Observer who seemed to think it very funny that Ted Heath had argued that redistribution of income was a traditional tenet of Conservative Party philosophy. Surely it was not so many years ago when it would have been as unthinkable for a major British political party to have no commitment to maintaining any degree of social equality and welfare as it would have been for an English cricket captain to publicly abuse an umpire and accuse him of cheating. The Thatcherite revolution has swept away the assumption of government responsibility to uphold decent human values implicit in Keynesian economics and consensus politics as comprehensively as the Juche revolution has swept away individual liberty.

In early February I was surprised to encounter an English guest at the Koryo. This Englishman, moreover, had been visiting North Korea on and off for a dozen years. He was a marketing consultant whose services were engaged by the government from time to time. Although no communist, he was full of enthusiasm for the country. His enthusiasm reawakened some of the positive feelings I had had in the beginning, feelings that had been dissipated by months of boredom and indifferent food. He reminded me of the things which I had initially found inspiring but which I had stopped noticing: the gentleness and kindness and dignity of the people; the fact that everywhere was safe, clean and orderly, and that the people were adequately fed, clothed and housed. I had been there long enough to know that the people were by no means as well provided for, even in respect of the basics, as at first appeared. They did not get as much to eat as they would like. They had very few clothes. Many lived in quite primitive accommodation. Many who lived in modern apartment blocks suffered from the cold in the winter; I had
learned that not all the apartment buildings had as reliable a central heating supply as the Ansan Chodasso. As for the workplaces, they were barely heated at all. Whenever I went to the publishing house to discuss my revision, I had to keep all my outdoor layers of thick winter clothing on indoors. That was in the rooms I was entertained in, which had carpets and curtains helping to retain a little heat. It must have been even colder in the bare rooms where the translators did their work. This, however, was not Europe. This was Asia. This was the third world. Yet nobody was homeless or starving. Everybody had security. Everybody had a place in society and the vast majority were contented.

He was also optimistic about the country’s economy. He did not see it as stagnant. He had been coming for a dozen years and could see the changes. When he first came, he told me, there was hardly a car to be seen on the roads. When I came to think about it, the volume of traffic seemed to have increased just in the short time I had been there. I recalled how a few days previously, returning from the Pyongyang Shop at about 6pm, there had been almost a traffic jam building up on the Okryu Bridge across the Taedong River.

He reminded me how much the country was liberalising. Only a few years ago it would have been out of the question for us to be sitting at a bar with Western pop music playing on the tape recorder, holding a conversation about the country with no Korean lurking close at hand to listen in to what we were saying. I took his point, but had to add that the country would have to liberalise a whole lot more before I would ever consider a return engagement.

He sighed a bit when I asked him what it was like to advise them on their marketing. It was difficult to get through to them. Their own culture was so out of step with the rest of the world of which they had so little understanding. They failed to comprehend how the rest of the world thinks and functions. He mentioned their ginseng products. The ginseng root flourishes in Korea. Although the term is unfamiliar to the outside world the North Koreans insist on calling ginseng by its Korean name, insam. They manufacture a range of products from it: insam toothpaste, insam soap, insam lotion, a liquor called Insamsul, even
insam cigarettes. He rightly pointed out that, apart from the odd-tasting cigarettes, all these products are of a high standard. He was having difficulty in educating the Koreans in the fact that these products are only going to competitive in the world market when they are professionally packaged and intelligently advertised and promoted.

By coincidence, the following day I received the February edition of the DPRK’s magazine, *Foreign Trade*, a glossy brochure which serves as a vehicle for promoting the country’s exports. Incredibly it was something I was never called upon to revise, although one would have thought the Koreans would consider it a more important publication than, for example, the utterly ridiculous *Pyongyang Times*. What should I find in *Foreign Trade* but a double-page spread on insam-based tonics, which read in part: ‘Kaesong Koryo Insam exerts a favourable action on all systems including the central nervous system, the cardiovascular system, the urinary-generative system, the muscular-bone system and hematogenous system, and is wide in its action. It enhances the mental-physical activities, dissipates one’s fatigue, increases resistance to internal and external unfavourable factors, prevents the ageing of cells or promotes their regeneration and improves metabolic process as a whole. Namely, it has an affirmative action on every side of activities of organism.’

And that is just for starters!

How on earth did I survive that dreadful Pyongyang winter? I suppose before I start complaining I should record that I was actually quite lucky. By Korean standards it was an exceptionally mild winter and there was very little snow.

It was an unusual winter too, inasmuch as it turned viciously cold when it was still only November and then became milder in mid-December. For the next three or four weeks, although there were cold spells, temperatures were little worse than one would normally expect in Britain at that time of year. This was a bit of a disaster for the locals. At the beginning of each November, each household is issued with several
kilos of cabbage to which the people then add spices to make their revolting national dish called kimchi, which supplements their grain ration. Refrigerators are a luxury. The households that do have one do not have large enough ones to store a whole winter’s supply of kimchi. Everyone therefore stores it out of doors in earthenware jars, relying on the sub-zero temperatures to keep it fresh. When temperatures in December 1987 rose as high as eight degrees centigrade, this had a most deleterious effect on the quality of their diet.

As January advanced temperatures plummeted to somewhere near the Korean norm, reaching as low as minus twenty centigrade at night. And that was where they stayed for weeks and weeks on end. Day dwindled into dismal day with mindbending monotony. Every morning I would get up at twenty five past seven for breakfast. Because breakfast was the only meal of the day guaranteed to be edible, even on Sundays I had to force myself to get out of bed for breakfast, although I did go back to bed again afterwards. The food, which was never brilliant at the best of times, plumbed new depths in the winter. Some of the cuts of meat we were served were only fit for pet food. I never actually went hungry in Pyongyang. I ate enough each day for the maintenance of health, but most days that was not as much as I felt like eating. In this I was sharing the same experience as the local population, except that in my case I was being served quite substantial quantities of food that I rejected because it was so revolting. To my embarrassment, the Koreans sent a deputation to see me to express concern that I was not eating enough. They asked if I had any requests to improve my diet. How could I tell these sweet, kind-hearted people to whom any meat was a luxury that what I was being served was only fit for pet food? I told them they must not worry. I was not about to starve to death. It was probably a good thing that I was not eating too much when I was not taking any exercise – since my hospitalisation, I had not dared to go swimming again – because it kept my weight down. Afterwards on their initiative they started giving me an extra round of toast in the morning, which was actually very welcome.

After breakfast I went back to my study-bedroom and set to work on my texts. It was the work that drove me crazy as much as anything
else. I was not used to sitting alone in a room at a desk all day long, day in day out, for forty-five hours a week. Social work in Britain may be an occupation where the pay does not reflect the pressures and responsibilities, but at least it is interesting and varied; it offers occasions for humour and drama, and the sense of doing something worthwhile. Nothing could be less worthwhile than revising the *Pyongyang Times*. However, in spite of the futility of my task, I always applied myself to it diligently. For a start I was being paid for it. Also the translators were lovely people. It seemed to me that if these nice people were doing their utmost to translate the rubbish that was being published to the best of their ability, then I owed it to them to revise their translations to the best of mine, particularly as they used to study my revision each week in order to improve their standard of English.

Once a week, usually on a Tuesday morning, I used to have a little outing to ease the monotony. This was when I was taken to the publishing house to revise the *Pyongyang Times* in situ. In the winter months this was a mixed blessing. Although it was nice to have a change of scenery, from November to March the interior of the building was always freezing cold. I used to sit there dressed in my overcoat, scarf, two thick pullovers and two pairs of socks, and I would still be blue with cold by the end of the morning. There was a thermometer in the room I worked in. It usually registered about fifteen or sixteen degrees centigrade. It must have been even colder in the bare, uncarpeted rooms where the translators worked. Such low temperatures were typical of North Korean workplaces in winter. In the shops and department stores for the locals, I used to see the salesgirls standing behind their counters swathed in their overcoats and voluminous headscarves. We were fortunate in the Ansan Chodasso. Most of the time a comfortable temperature of around twenty-five degrees was maintained, although we did have a few days of misery when it slipped down to twenty or twenty-one. Whenever I went to the publishing house in winter, I was always relieved when the time came to return to the warmth of the Ansan Chodasso. Nevertheless I still preferred to go there than not, as it meant at least some variety in my daily routine. Otherwise I spent the whole of every working day in my room.
I once asked an interpreter when I thought he was off his guard what heating conditions were like for the average Korean living in an apartment block. He told me frankly that the heating situation was variable. Half the time the temperature would be quite comfortable, at other times it would be like it was in the publishing house, pretty dire, albeit above the level where old people are likely to expire from hypothermia. I was told that the power stations have been having difficulty keeping pace with the increased fuel demands of industry and also domestic consumers, as more people have been rehoused in modern flats from the traditional cottages which have their own coal-burning stoves, and are not connected with the centralised heating system. The Koreans cope with their spartan conditions by wearing several layers of underwear. I noticed that all the men wore track suit bottoms under their trousers. I assumed this was to keep themselves warm in winter, until I saw that a lot of them continued to wear them, even in spring and summer.

I did not often venture such questions to Koreans. Apart from the fact that one could not always rely on a truthful answer, asking questions puts them on the spot and can create uneasiness. Once they get to know you, they are torn between the natural human desire for genuine communication and the duty to make propaganda. If they cannot bring themselves to lie to you, they tend to resort to evasion. Usually such excessive secrecy defeats its own purpose. In the absence of knowledge there arise wild speculation and rumour. It is not surprising that there are diplomats living in Pyongyang who seriously believe that most Korean apartment blocks are provided with no form of heating at all. As long as foreigners are not allowed to visit Koreans in their homes, such erroneous beliefs will persist. Of course I cannot prove that my informant was telling the truth. I can only trust my judgement that he was.

The revisers who were working on the president’s collected works used to have detailed discussions with their translators about the revisions they had made. The Koreans regarded their president’s works as sacred. Great importance therefore was attached to faithfulness to the original in the translations. Much more latitude was allowed in translations
for the periodicals and the other texts that came my way to revise. All that mattered in these was that they should read satisfactorily and communicate the same information as the original. Usually the translators accepted my revised versions just as they stood. I was always told that I was going to the publishing house for a discussion about the *Pyongyang Times* but what actually happened was that I would revise articles while I was there and the translators would take it in turns to sit with me while I did them, as a learning exercise. They could ask questions about the amendments I was making and practise their spoken English by making conversation with me. It was a congenial arrangement from my point of view. I was always pleased to chat to the translators. There were some I would have loved to be able to mix with socially. From the work point of view, however, I could never concentrate as well at the publishing house as I could in the solitude of my room.

I often used to receive a brief visit on a Tuesday morning from the chief translator of *Korea* magazine, who was a particular favourite of mine. He was a genial little man and as a translator he had a good feel for the English language. His command of idiom and vocabulary were no better than any of the other translators but he had the right idea about English style and sentence structure. Korean sentences are like Latin periods, long and complex, full of subordinate clauses, with the main verb tantalisingly deferred until the end of the sentence. I remembered from my school days how I used to make a literal translation from the Latin and then go over it again, breaking down what was still essentially a Latin period with English words into a number of short English sentences. At first many of the translations I received reminded me of my original draft translations from Latin at school. They consisted of Korean sentences with English words. By the time I left, all the translators had learned from my revisions and were presenting me with English sentences. My friend from the pictorial magazine was one who already grasped how contemporary English should be written.

I was constantly being asked what I thought of their translations. It was a hard question to answer. I was not sure how a competent English linguist specialising in a very alien language like Chinese or Arabic would
fare if required to make written translations from English into the foreign language instead of the other way round. I was aware that those people laboured under very considerable disadvantages. They had very, very few opportunities to converse with native English speakers or even to hear English being spoken on films. Their access to contemporary English language books and periodicals was severely limited. Their staple fare seemed to be things like Moscow News and China Daily, or Britain’s own Morning Star, although I had the impression that the situation was slowly improving. I once saw a young translator with a copy of Newsweek.

Sometimes I used to answer them that the quality of the translations was less of a problem than the quality of the original articles. I pointed out that their propaganda was pitched at an incredibly naïve level while many of the articles were rambling, ill-informed and incoherent. My remarks cause the translators some embarrassment. They were not at liberty to say as much, but it was evident that they were already aware of this problem. Moscow News, China Daily and Beijing Review may not provide the optimum models of English prose but they are all characterised in recent times by a willingness to engage reality in putting over the state’s viewpoint. From their reading of publications such as these, the translators could tell that the sort of nonsense their country was putting out was out of step even with the rest of the communist world. They sensed that to portray everything in their country as perfect was to invite derision from the outside world. They knew enough to know that their government’s version of what South Korea is like was less than truthful and would therefore make no impression on foreigners who had access to plenty of other sources of information. I sensed with the translators, as with most educated people in North Korea, that they were committed to their revolutions, but realised that changes were needed and that abandoning naïve and self-defeating propaganda was one of them. I sensed that they felt frustrated at not being able to do anything to rectify things. In North Korea all decisions are passed from the top down. Comments and criticism from grassroots level are not encouraged.

Of the three English language periodicals, the publishing house attached least importance to having the glossy pictorial magazine, Korea,
revised. My friend the chief translator was determined that if I did not have time to make a careful revision of translations each month, then I would make time. He employed a variety of amusing methods to spur me on. One of them was to contend that I should give priority to his magazine because it was the most important and prestigious propaganda organ of the DPRK. He pointed out that it was printed on high quality paper and packed with bright photographs that would attract people’s attention and convey a favourable impression of his country.

He was not being entirely serious but I, for my part, was inclined to agree with him. Primarily a pictorial magazine with brief articles, his magazine had little space to devote the expounding the Juche Idea, and, apart from an obligatory piece each month about the heroic struggle being waged by the South Korean people against the military fascist puppet regime of traitor Roh Tae Woo, it was relatively free of polemics. It concentrated instead on portraying in words and pictures the genuinely attractive aspects of North Korean society, a society which is striving to develop independently and maintain a benign and decent social system. The system may be failing but its intentions are fundamentally good.

‘Still, in principle’, my friend Sami used to lecture me from time to time, ‘In principle they are right.’

*Korea* magazine is full of celebrations of the banal achievements of factory girls and railway workers, ordinary citizens whose only claim to fame is that they have overfulfilled their production quotas, people like the ladies of the Kin Chaek Knitwear Factory: ‘At the entrance of the next shop, we saw a bulletin board which displayed the results of workteams Nos. 2 and 3, awarded the Three Revolution Red Flag. “Pang Yong Sun and Choe Jung Hui have overfulfilled today’s quota by five per cent.”

‘Kim Suk Gyong, chief engineer, who was taking us round, remarked, “Most of our workers are women. They are hard-working and keep their factory clean. The Broad Bellflower brand of women’s sweater has won a gold medal at a national fair.”

‘Their products are attractive and the quality is good. The workers look after the factory like a palace and its compound like a park. They truly love their workplace.’ (*Korea*, March 1988)
Even the naïvety of style and content seem less inappropriate in this publication, perhaps because they reflect the way things are in this hard-working society, where simple people have a simple outlook on life.

Another tactic my friend used to stir me up on his behalf was flattery. ‘All the time,’ he used to say to me, ‘Whether I am walking in the street or lying in my bed at night, always I am thinking how can I improve the standard of my translations. Always I look forward so much to receiving your revisions. I think your style of English is so clear and concise. I am able to learn so much from you. Always I study your revisions with the greatest care so that I can learn from your corrections. Every morning I am waiting to see if you have returned my translations yet. I am so disappointed when I have to wait and wait. So please in future try to send them back as quickly as possible to help me improve my translations.’

He was not averse to a spot of emotional blackmail either. He would remind me that he was fifty-four this year, deaf in one ear, and having trouble with his eyesight, ‘and so I cannot do with so much criticism. If you do not return my translations in good time, then they are late for the printers. I say it is not my fault, the reviser did not send them back in time. Then they say it is still my fault because I should have kept urging you on to get them done. When I have to wait so many days for you to revise my translations, I cannot sleep at night for worry.’ He was saying this to me in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, but I sensed, as is often the case when people are speaking frivolously, an underlying seriousness. His tone and manner were not intended to suggest that he really was unable to sleep at night for fear of harsh criticism, but I did get the impression that he was subject to a certain amount of pressure he could do without.

From my observations, I would say that people in the DPRK are not subject to brutal coercion, but they are constantly subject to intense psychological pressure to conform in thought, word and deed and to push themselves to the limit in building the revolution and construction. Collectively, people are continually exhorted to work harder by posters, slogans, loudspeaker vans, newspapers, radio and TV. From time to time special campaigns are launched. In February 1988, the biggest ever was launched, a two-hundred-day campaign during which people would
work a twelve-hour day, seven days a week, to step up production. The intention was to fulfil all the economic targets for the whole year by September 9th, the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Republic, and make the occasion a ‘great festival of victory’. The campaign was heralded by a mass rally in Kim Il Sung Square which was broadcast live on television. Reports on the campaign’s progress, uniformly and unrealistically glowing, dominated the North Korean media over the ensuing months.

I do not know, because in the DPRK it is impossible for foreigners to know, how pressure is brought to bear on people on an individual level, but one can be fairly sure that cadres and party officials make extensive use of criticism. Kim Il Sung is a great advocate of criticism. ‘Criticism is meant to train people, and they need it in the same way as they wash their faces every day. If a man does not wash his face, it becomes dirty. So he must wash his face every day. Just as washing is needed to keep our faces clean, so is criticism to keep our minds clean.’ (cw, Vol. 27, p. 113)

It is not sufficient for people to passively submit to criticism. It is important that they acknowledge the relevance of the criticism they receive and are prepared to criticise themselves. On the subject of self-criticism, he refers to the thoughts of his mentor Josef Stalin – until as recently as 1980, one of Pyongyang’s main thoroughfares was still called Stalin Street:

‘We have the sharp, tested weapons of criticism and self-criticism to use in the struggle to temper party spirit. Wielding this weapon, we must sweep away all tendencies that run counter to party spirit and expose and rectify defects and errors in our work and thus improve it constantly.

‘Comrade Stalin has said, “Should we fail to recognise or to bring out into the open in all frankness and honesty, as behaves Bolsheviks, the shortcomings and mistakes in our work, we will be barring ourselves from the road to progress. But we want to advance. And precisely because we want to advance, we must pose to ourselves as one of the most important tasks, the task of honest and revolutionary self-criticism. Otherwise there will be no advance. Otherwise, there is no development.”’ (cw, Vol. 7, p. 335)
Nor will criticism in Kim Il Sung’s view be effective in itself. It must be accompanied by kindness and understanding. The prescription he offers in the following passage has a military context but it could equally well be applied in a civilian one. Just as the Korean People’s Army, like all communist armies, has a dual hierarchy of military commanders and a political commissariat, power in commercial and industrial enterprises is shared between the director or manager and the party secretary.

‘The company commander must treat his men just as he does his own younger brother, and when any of his men has made a mistake he must criticise him sternly and intelligibly. The company political instructor must, like a good-natured elder sister [sic], deal with the men kindly and gently.

‘Suppose a man made a mistake and was criticised severely by the company commander. Then, the company political instructor must see him and explain to him kindly that he must not complain of the criticism made by the company commander, that his mistake was a fact, that the criticism will benefit him because it will stimulate him to improve and that he should try to correct the mistake with the help of his comrades. If, instead, the political instructor joins the company commander in criticising the men, the men will not follow the commander and the political instructor enthusiastically. They will say that they have no-one to depend on in the company, and become homesick.

‘Only when the company political instructor treats the men with the tenderness of an elder sister, will the men come to see him and speak their minds. The political instructor must listen to what they have to tell him and, if he hears any serious error, he must persuade the man involved to correct it immediately and maintain secrecy about those matters which he must keep to himself.’ (cw, Vol. 28, p. 439)

I have digressed from recounting my own personal miseries. Apart from my weekly outing to the publishing house, I spent the rest of the week trapped in my study-bedroom with my texts. This was something I did not much care for at the best of times. At least in warm weather I could
go for a short walk if I felt too restless or just take a turn on the balcony. In winter the cold was too extreme to step outside without physical and psychological preparations. Meals offered some respite but they were nothing to look forward to.

Nearly every day at five o’clock I padded myself out in two pairs of socks, a thick pair of trousers, two thick pullovers, scarf, gloves and woolly hat. I also wore two overcoats. I augmented the coat I had brought from England, one which had proved more than adequate for the winters at home, with a cheap, outsize, fur-lined Chinese raincoat which I purchased locally for a few dollars. It was an unsightly garment, a stereotypical flasher mac. I did not care. Vanity is a luxury to be dispensed with in wintry Pyongyang. The important thing was that it was big enough to fit over the top of my other coat and afford an extra layer of insulation.

There were days when I was so keen to escape from my room, I was down the stairs and out at five o’clock sharp like a greyhound bursting from the trap. There were other days when I dreaded the thought of stepping out into the icy blast that raked the streets of Pyongyang, these streets that had looked so attractive when I first arrived and there had been green on the trees and flowers everywhere, but which now looked utterly drab, dreary and monotonous. There were a few days when I succumbed to apathy and stayed indoors. I always regretted it the following day as my feelings of claustrophobia would become more intense. It was easier to motivate myself to get out if I had something to buy from the shops, a biro, a jar of coffee, a bottle of whisky. Having a purchase to make gave a sense of purpose to my expedition. Sometimes I could only force myself to stay out for ten or fifteen minutes. On other days, if the wind was still, I might manage a whole hour. There were times when I enjoyed my walk as the sun went down over the Potang River and the first stars emerged in the darkening sky. Often, though, my walks had the character of a grim necessity. I felt I had to get outside for a little fresh air and exercise each day if I was to hold onto my health and sanity. I was very conscious of the fact that I was following a more sedentary occupation than I had in England and not participating in any sport either.

I doubt if there are many cities in the world that can be both as
attractive in the summer and as desolate in the winter as Pyongyang. Shorn of its flowers and foliage, North Korea's capital was revealed as stark, drab and functional. The women who had looked so graceful in summer, now cowled in their thick headscarves, were like wraiths swept along by the wind.

On returning home from my walk, I would read until supper time at seven o’clock. Reading is not an ideal activity when one has been poring over texts all day, but there was no alternative. From the end of December I virtually abandoned going out in the evenings. There was nowhere to go except the Koryo. Everywhere else was completely dead. Even the Koryo was virtually kept open for three months for the exclusive convenience of the West German engineers. It seemed almost eerie to me, this big luxury hotel devoid of activity or guests. And it was such an effort to drag oneself out in the cold to get there. I would go there every few days only when I was compelled by an urgent need to get out of my environment at all costs. Sometimes I would bump into an acquaintance and it would be quite pleasant for a while. Then I would have to keep checking my watch because it was imperative to get to the underground station by ten thirty to be sure of catching the last tube train. Since the collapse of the dollar I had been reluctant to take taxis. With the initial problem over my salary and my illness, my finances were not looking to healthy, and taxi fares in Pyongyang are not cheap. After 11pm they double. Then it costs the equivalent of four dollars in red won to go from the Koryo to the Ansan Chodasso, which is no more than two miles away if that. It is no good trying to leave just a little bit earlier. The taxi drivers vanish between 10:15 and 11pm and reappear when it is time to double the fares. The thought of walking back at night in such weather was insupportable. I did it once with Jean-Jacques, and the journey seemed to go on forever. I bitterly resented not having a car. If I had had a car, I could have popped down to the Koryo each evening for a change of scenery. If there was no-one there, I could have stayed for one drink and then left. When I met somebody to talk to, I need not have to worry about getting home. As it was, by foot and underground it took the best part of half an hour just to get there and another twenty minutes to thaw out on arrival.
Most evenings, then, I sat in my living room. When I could summon the willpower, I used to work on this book. When I went out to Pyongyang, I had a vague intention of writing about my experiences. It took the awfulness of winter to really galvanise me into literary activity. Writing gave me something to do to pass the time. It is a sad thing when time is something to be killed as opposed to spent. Writing also shored up my self-esteem. I felt less of a fool for being in Korea if I could define myself as an anthropologist in the field, making a study of a reclusive, little-known tribe. I could not always summon the will power to write. When I could, I could seldom sustain the effort for more than an hour. I always spent part of the evening reading. Then I would put on the television or play tapes while I drank enough alcohol to ensure a good night’s oblivion.

Before the end of January I felt as if I had reached the limit of my coping capacity. I was far short of saving a respectable amount of money to come home with, but I was thinking that whatever problems I might have on my return, anything would be better than the limbo in which I was living in Pyongyang. On the other hand, I felt that to go home at this point would be an admission of defeat. I had given up a secure job and taken myself off to the far side of the world, and up to now I had seen nothing. If I stuck it out, I would be able to travel across China to visit Hong Kong, I would have the opportunity to see something of Korea other than the capital, and I would be able to accumulate enough material for a book. To return prematurely would make the whole venture an irrevocable waste of time. To stay was not a pleasing prospect. Faced with this dilemma, I decided to up the stakes and see what happened. I told the Koreans I wanted an eighteen per cent pay rise to take account of the fall in the value of the dollar. Otherwise it was not worth my while to stay and they must fly me home in March.

I had been there long enough to know what was going to happen next. Nothing. They played a waiting game. The hope was that I would interpret prolonged silence as refusal and retract my ultimatum. If I did not, and they were going to keep me, they would at least save themselves a few dollars by delaying my pay rise as long as possible. I gave them
nearly a month. Then I told them that I must have a decision soon. They chose to keep me dangling for a few days more. Finally they told me in February that they would grant my request from the following month, on condition that I would guarantee to remain until August and that I told no-one else, not even Sami, about my pay increase. I did not like being sworn to secrecy but it seemed expedient in the circumstances. To come away after twelve months with a book and something like my original savings target might enable me to define my year in Pyongyang as time invested rather than time wasted. The extra money I was to receive would just about cover the money that earlier they had, as far as I was concerned, cheated me out of.

By the time this was sorted out, I was still living in a fog of depression, but at least I was only a few weeks away from a sanity-saving holiday in Hong Kong. At the end of the long, dark tunnel of winter in Pyongyang beckoned the bright lights of Hong Kong. I gritted my teeth, took my later afternoon walks through the frozen streets, ate my rice and soup, and drank myself to sleep. It was one of the few compensations of life in Pyongyang that liquor was extremely cheap. Until June 1988, when the prices of alcohol and cigarettes doubled overnight, reputable brands of Scotch could be bought for as little as five or six dollars a bottle. Vodka was even cheaper. A half-litre of Stolichnaya cost a little over a dollar. I imagine this was due to Mr Gorbachev’s clampdown on drunkenness. The vodka that the Soviet authorities would not release on the domestic market was being sold off to friends and neighbours at bargain basement prices.

Naturally life was not all unremitting tedium. For example, I spent some extremely pleasant evenings in the company of Holmer and Astrid, with whom I became fast friends. I derived immense pleasure from re-reading Lord of the Rings for the first time since college days. But all in all winter in Pyongyang was not an experience I would wish to repeat.

Weekends were almost worse than weekdays. I was glad of the respite from revising ridiculous texts but time on Saturday afternoons and Sundays used to weigh heavily on my hands. Once nice thing was that I was able to make my daily excursion earlier in the day while the cold
was less intense. In Pyongyang in winter the air is very dry, and there are many days of sunshine and clear skies. When there was no wind, it could be very pleasant out in the middle of the day if one was well wrapped up. Sometimes I would be out for two or three hours, exploring the city—not that there is so much to explore, because it is all so homogeneous—or strolling along the banks of the Potang River, or even walking on the frozen river itself, always a novelty for a native of more temperate zones.

One section of the population which evidently had no objection to the winter was the children. Everywhere there was ice, and wherever there was ice there were ebullient boys on skates. For some reason, I never saw many girls skating. As for the adults, they were as usual too busy building the revolution and construction. The younger boys did not usually have proper pairs of skates. They used to squat on a tiny wooden platform mounted on a single skate and propel themselves along on this peculiar device with two spiked sticks, like crude miniature versions of the ones skiers use.

In February, to mark the Dear Leader’s birthday, we were taken on an outing to the International Club for a film show. The first film was an hour-long propaganda documentary dedicated to the promotion of the Dear Leader. This was quite interesting. It was evident that there had been an awareness that the poor chap tended to come over as a bit of a drip, trailing diffidently in his father’s footsteps, and that a conscious effort had been made to give him a more dynamic image. To some extent I think it is fair to say that the film makers had succeeded, although I do not understand these things sufficiently to attempt an analysis of how they did it. I remember there were quite a few shots of him gesticulating expansively with a cigarette in his hand. Nevertheless, whatever his real intellectual and political capabilities may be, I was left in no doubt that this tubby little man in built-up shoes will never managed to fill the role of monarch and high priest of the Juche religion around whom the Party and the people unite firmly in unquestioning loyalty and obedience.

The other film was a Korean feature film called *Broad Bellflower*. I had
revised so many articles about this film for the periodicals that I felt as if I had seen in already. In September 1987, Pyongyang had provided the venue for the first Film Festival of Non Aligned and Other Developing Countries, and Broad Bellflower had been awarded first prize, so the Koreans were incredibly chuffed about it. The film is, like so many things North Korean, rather charming and patently absurd.

The story concerns Song Rim, an orphan girl who lives with her younger sister in a remote mountain village. The villagers live in thatched cottages and have no electricity. She is in love with a talented young man called Won Bong. Won Bong is dissatisfied with the limited horizons the village offers and the low standard of living. He wants to move to an urban environment to better himself. He asks Song Rim to go with him, but she refuses. She insists that it is their duty to stay and work to raise the quality of life in their native place, instead of looking elsewhere for easier opportunities. Won Bong remains determined to move to the city in search of a better life. Song Rim will not go with him. So they separate, although they love each other dearly. Song Rim plays a leading role in organising the villagers into modernising their village, until one day she is buried in an avalanche while trying to rescue a sheep during a storm. A quarter of a century after his departure, a despairing Won Bong returns to his village with his teenage son. He is in despair because he had discovered the important truth in life that it is impossible for a person ever to find true happiness outside the place where he belongs. He knows that he is persona non grata in the village because he turned his back on it all those years before, but he wants his son to have the opportunity to live life as it should be lived, as part of the community to which he rightly belongs. He sends his son on into the village while he remains looking down from the path above. Once his son is out of sight, he sinks to his knees and scoops up handfuls of his native earth and weeps. The villagers initially make his son welcome, but when they discover who his father is, controversy rages as to whether he should be allowed to remain in what is now a thriving little community with tiled roofs on the cottages, electricity, and a fleet of tractors. The makers of the film do not seem to have considered that this controversy reflects
badly on the villagers’ humanity, or that Won Bong’s abject despair says little for the relationship he has with his son or with the boy’s mother.

Nevertheless in spite of all its absurdities, it was not a bad film. The acting was very good. The photography was stunning. It was even enlivened with a couple of catchy songs, one of which included the immortal lines sung by Song Rim’s sister, ‘I’m not going to get married until I’m a fully qualified tractor driver.’ Most people who saw it felt that the people who made it had the ability to make a film of genuine quality if they were freed from the restrictions of socialist-realist canons of art, the obligation to subordinate artistic considerations to getting the Party message over, the message in this case presumably directed at the younger peasantry who have doubtless been getting a bit restive since television was introduced into the community hall down on the co-operative farm.

There was another event to mark the Dear Leader’s birthday to which we humble revisers were sadly not invited. This was the banquet for the diplomatic community which was thrown at the sumptuous new Workers’ Party of Korea headquarters. Something extraordinary happened on this occasion that made it an instant legend in Pyongyang. The foreigners were treated to a cabaret that included a display of dancing by scantily-clad Korean nymphs. From all accounts, it was pretty tame stuff by international standards, but for North Korea it was quite without precedent and became the main topic of conversation on the diplomatic circuit for weeks afterwards. Not everyone was pleased by it. The Pakistani ambassador expressed outrage at being exposed to such an immoral spectacle. His Indian counterpart told him that if he did not like it, he could have closed his eyes. On the assumption that the girls had had previous practice, speculation hardened that a small elite at the pinnacle of Pyongyang society may be enjoying a less lofty morality than is advocated for the rest of the population.
For weeks the prospect of going to Hong Kong for a holiday had been dangled before me like a dream of resurrection. I originally planned to go at the end of March, but there came a point when I could not stand to wait any longer. I finally made my half-term escape from Pyongyang on Monday, March 7th. Just before noon, I settled into a comfortable sleeping compartment on the international train to Beijing, armed with my Chinese transit visa, my Korean re-entry visa and my Korean exit permit – yes, you even need official permission to leave the country. Among other things, I was looking forward to a rare, uncensored view of the Korean countryside. I had yet to be taken on a weekend outing, but other foreigners had told me that when the North Koreans took you on a trip, they usually arranged for you to travel at night. There may well have been an innocuous explanation for this but it naturally gave rise to the theory that they wanted to transport you in the dark to stop you seeing anything you were not supposed to.

What I saw en route on the four-hour journey to the border town of Sinuiju was neither particularly prepossessing nor anything to be ashamed of. Orderly fields, drab and colourless at the end of a long winter, co-operative farm villages of identical whitewashed tiled cottages, the same as the ones that proliferate between the apartment blocks in Pyongyang. Some more industrialised townships where the train sometimes stopped. It all looked pretty dreary, but then things always do in winter and there were tractors to be seen as well as donkeys and bullock cards. Technical advisors whose tasks had necessitated that they were taken off the tourist track assured me that the countryside was much the same wherever they went. People who had been to South Korea as well told me that the countryside there looks quite similar, although obviously the level of development in urban South Korea is in a different league entirely.

The town of Sinuiju on the south bank of the Mnok River, which constitutes the border between China and Korea, looked to be one
of those places on the planet like Rushden, Northamptonshire, or Grantham, Lincolnshire, best to be seen from the windows of a passing train and almost certainly unhealthful to the soul to grow up in. The train stopped there for two hours. I stepped outside for a few minutes. From the platform I could see the town’s outstanding feature, a giant statue of the leader facing southwards, his arms extended as if to embrace his devoted subjects. Every town of any size or significance has at least one big bronze statue of him set up in a prominent place. I went into the sad little souvenir shop on the platform. It was unheated. All it contained were a few unappealing handicrafts. A stoical young lady huddled in an overcoat and pale blue headscarf, stood behind the counter in the cold. I wondered how often she made a sale: once a week? once a month? I did not hang around long. The cold soon drove me back to the warmth of the compartment. The long delay at the border is partly incurred by the need to uncouple the Korean engine, buffet car and local passenger carriages from the international portion of the train, which is then shunted across the river by an old steam locomotive. I saw several of these in Sinuiju. DPRK propaganda has it that the railways are more than ninety per cent electrified and steam trains are never seen in Pyongyang. On the basis of what I saw in Sinuiju and other provincial towns I visited later, I would not be surprised if in reality steam did not account for as large a proportion of the freight transport of North Korean as it does of China, where steam engines are still being manufactured. In Hamhung I saw a steam locomotive pulling a passenger train. The other reason for the long halt is that the customs officials, who never seem to trouble foreigners at all, go through the belongings of their fellow countrymen with a fine-tooth comb. The list of articles not to be taken out of the country includes unprocessed animal products. I smiled when I saw this, but it is evidently meant to be taken seriously. A few minutes later I noticed a customs officer going down the platform with a carton of eggs. Would he have been within his rights to confiscate them if they had already been boiled?

Alongside the railway bridge that links Korea to China, the ruins of the former bridge have been deliberately left in place as a memento of the
American bombing. There is not much of it to see. The bridge is intact for about fifty yards out from the Chinese bank. All that remains after that is the damaged pieces.

After all the excitement of the river crossing there is another two-hour wait at Dandong on the Chinese side of the border for one to recollect one’s composure. I again left the train to take a brief turn on the platform. Except that, being Chinese, it is less clean and tidy-looking, Dandong seemed to have as little to recommend it as Sinuiju, but, like Sinuiju, it has its monument, an almost identical statue in scale and pose to the one on the southern bank, only this one of course is of dear old Uncle Mao. I wonder which was erected first. There is a shop on Dandong station, too, and it offers money-changing facilities so I was able to purchase some yuan. Like the shop in Sinuiju station it was unheated, but the goods on display were more attractive and the assistants carried an air of optimism that they might make the occasional sale.

Half an hour or so before the train was due to leave, I was visited in my compartment by three customs officers. They had not come to harass me. They had noticed my British passport and wanted an opportunity to practise their English on me. They were all young men in their late twenties. Each was married. Each had the statutory one child. They would have liked to have more children, but they understood and accepted the reasons why their government was imposing restrictions. They had lived narrow lives. None of them had ever been to Beijing. One of them had, while serving in the army been able to visit the Great Wall. They were minor officials working a forty-eight hour week with, one imagined, little realistic hope of significant advancement. Yet they were striving assiduously in their spare time to master a remote European language. They were learning it from the television. When I mentioned this to Jean-Jacques, he told me that Chinese television not only broadcasts daily lessons in English and Japanese, but in the evening one channel goes out exclusively in English from 9pm onwards, the news read in English followed by English or American films or TV programmes.

These young customers officers were not making bad progress with their English, either. We were able to have quite a reasonable conversation.
I felt quite moved by them. Imagine the average working man in England going home to learn Chinese at the end of his day’s labours. It is symptomatic of China’s current determination to drag itself out of its backwardness into the modern world that it is encouraging the whole population to master the international language of technology and commerce. One could make out a case that it is symptomatic of a socialist country that the ordinary provincial working man feels that this challenge has some relevance to him.

The need for a better knowledge of foreign languages, particularly English, is something the North Koreans are only just waking up to; for years they lived in a dream in which the technical revolution would be carried out by the Koreans themselves using their own techniques and experiences, as if a small underdeveloped country could attain world standards in science by its own researches alone. They have now made it the rule that technical and scientific students must also learn a foreign language, and that foreign language specialists have to study at least two languages. But for the moment linguistic limitations are a serious impediment to economic progress. Some technical advisors, frustrated at having to try and communicate with technicians who only had a flimsy command of English, or else at having to communicate through interpreters who had no idea about the subject under discussion, went so far as to state that poor language skills constituted the major impediment to the country’s advancement. Although I met plenty of Koreans who could hold a conversation in English there were few indeed, including the translators at the publishing house, with whom I could converse as easily as I could with educated Swiss, Swedes, Germans et cetera, and be understood without speaking in a consciously slow and deliberate manner – and, remember, I was talking to their English language specialists.

When the train finally left Dandong, what little I saw of the Manchurian countryside before darkness descended seemed to differ from Korea only in that the cottages were of red brick and the villages were less tidy. It was only when I went down to the restaurant car for dinner that I experienced a real contrast between Korea and China.
Shortly after the train let Pyongyang station, a beautiful, immaculately turned-out Korean girl came to my compartment with a menu in four languages plus pictures of the dishes for anyone who did not understand Korean, Chinese, Russian or English. I ordered a dish of meatballs, chicken and fried potatoes. This turned out to be a bit on the greasy side but by Korean standards quite palatable. My lunch was served in a bare but immaculately clean and tidy restaurant car, with flowers on the tables, by another very attractive and graceful girl in a black crushed velvet frock. As there were not many foreigners on the train, there were few diners. The meal was cheap by international standards, about five dollars with a couple of beers thrown in, but this was beyond the price ranges of ordinary Koreans who had to take their own food to eat on the journey.

The Chinese restaurant car was a very different story, a tatty affair, the tables covered with greyish plastic cloths. My travelling companion and I were presented with a greasy menu several pages long. However, when we tried to order from the vast array of dishes that were advertised, the Chinese waiter just kept shaking his head until at last we asked him to point to the dishes that were available. This made our selection process simple in the extreme. The food turned out to be quite good. Even with a couple of beers included, the meal only came to about two dollars. The low cost offered a singular advantage to the local population. The Chinese could afford to eat in the restaurant car too.

I could not class Beijing, apart from its great tourist attractions the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City, among the most attractive cities I have visited, but it was wonderful to be back in the real world again. As one would expect in such a populous country, there were plenty of people on the streets although I did not encounter the same crush of humanity as in Cairo or an Indian city. There was traffic on the roads, just like in a real city, and of course lots and lots of bicycles. The bicycles were for some reason exempt from traffic light regulations, which made being a pedestrian in Beijing a hazardous experience. The fact that some of the drivers of motor vehicles seemed to think they should be exempt too made matters even worse. It was all very nerve-wracking after Pyongyang,
where there is little traffic and hardly any bicycles at all. Only people who need a bicycle to go about their business, e.g., electricians employed to maintain the streetlights, are allowed to ride on in Pyongyang. In spite of the low volume of traffic, pedestrians in Pyongyang are governed by strict regulations. Except on side streets they must cross either by pedestrian underpass or by zebra crossing. The zebra crossings confused me at first because although pedestrians must cross at them and can be fined for crossing elsewhere, the cars are not required to stop! Pedestrian underpasses are located at every major crossroads. To somebody coming from urban Britain, they are remarkable because they are entirely free of graffiti and perfectly safe at all times of the day or night.

Beijing boasted busy, modern hotels. The shops were teeming with produce. There were cafés and restaurants catering for both tourists and locals. Maxim’s of Paris has set up a Beijing branch. It was lovely to be surrounded by so much vitality, but the loveliest thing of all was to be able to walk around without being stared at all the time. China’s open door policy has been in operation long enough now for foreigners to be no longer objects of curiosity. The only unwelcome attention I received was from a young man stopping me on the streets and furtively enquiring if I wanted to change-a-money.

High-buttoned Mao suits were still in evidence but the younger people’s clothes were more in line with world fashions. But if the youth of Beijing looked less old-fashioned, they also tended to look shabbier than their counterparts in Pyongyang.

In spite of Beijing’s new-found cosmopolitanism and the evidence of burgeoning prosperity, I did not have to venture far from the main thoroughfares to be reminded that the country is still firmly entrenched in the third world. This fact was brought home to me more forcibly on the train to Guangzhou. To travel by the highest class, the soft sleeper class, cost me the princely sum of two hundred and thirty-five yuan. The rate of exchange at the time was 3.79 yuan to the dollar. If I had been Chinese, my fare would have been fifty per cent cheaper. Tourists
on Chinese railways are charged double fare. The fares are still beyond the means of most Chinese. Many Chinese, I suspect a majority even of the urban population, never stray far from their native towns and cities because of the cost. Nevertheless, demand for transport is high. Chinese trains are nearly always full and it is virtually impossible to buy a ticket on the same day that you wish to travel, and by no means certain that a ticket will be available for the following day.

I expect it is the novelty of travelling that makes the people get a bit over-excited. As soon as they opened the gates at Beijing station to let us onto the platform, they all rushed down it in a noisy mêlée, like war-whooping Red Indians in the cowboy movies. This is in spite of the fact that there is no need to compete for prime places. Each ticket is clearly marked with both compartment and seat number.

It was a fascinating journey from Beijing to Guangzhuo, but not an unmitigated joy. The sleeping compartment was reasonably comfortable but it was less spacious than the compartment on the Korean train had been and all four bunks were occupied. There was not an empty seat or bunk throughout the whole train, which must have been twenty carriages long. If the accommodation was satisfactory, the state of the toilets left a great deal to be desired. They were nastier and smaller than anything I ever encountered on Indian railways. What was even more annoying was that the tap water kept running out. I soon picked up that the train took on more water each time it made a protracted stop at a major station. I learned that this was the time to grab my soap and towel and join the milling throng that surged outside the washroom waiting for the guard to unlock the door once the train had left the station. In spite of such inconveniences, it was wonderful to be journeying across vast tracts of China. What made it particularly wonderful was that the train was heading south. All the time the weather was becoming steadily warmer, and the iron grip of the Pyongyang winter was receding into the mists of memory. China’s new prosperity was visible in the countryside too. Everywhere spacious new two-storey red brick houses were springing up, which the peasants are now able to afford since the institution of economic reforms.
I shared my compartment with a young Japanese student couple who spoke only a little English and a Chinese lady who spoke none at all, so our conversation was limited. However, I had been invited for lunch by a Chinese whose acquaintance I had made while queuing to get onto the platform at Beijing.

There was no restaurant car on the train. I had been forewarned of this probability by Jean-Jacques and had stocked up with bread, biscuits and fresh cheese, an item unobtainable in Pyongyang, at Beijing’s excellent International Friendship Store, a supermarket and department store nicely calculated to induce foreigners to part with their dollars, with the like of which Pyongyang has nothing to compare. I also knew to bring a jar of coffee and a plastic mug. Tea and coffee are not sold on Chinese trains, but each compartment is provided with a thermos of hot water which is periodically replenished so that travellers can make their own. The boiled water also comes in useful for cleaning teeth.

Xiao Zhenya was in his early thirties and spoke excellent English. At noon he came and collected me from my soft sleeper compartment and led me down the train to his hard sleeper compartment. The carriage was not divided into compartments with doors and walls. There were just rows of bare bunks, three tiers high, facing each other the length of the carriage. Ladders were provided for the convenience of those unfortunate souls to whom fate had dealt the top bunk. At the next station Xiao Zhenya’s friend, Mr Li, slipped out onto the platform to purchase our lunch. He returned with three cans of beer and a freshly cooked chicken in a polythene bag.

My friend was the sales manager of the import-export division of the Hunan branch of the China National Non-Ferrous Metals Import and Export Corporation. This seemed to be as important a job as it sounded. His work had taken him on several occasions to the States and the Europe, including Britain, where, like the good communist he was, he had paid his respects at Karl Marx’s tomb in Highgate Cemetery. He was on his way back from a business trip to Beijing. I expressed surprise that someone in his position should be travelling in such poor circumstances. He showed some amusement at this. He reminded me that China was
a communist country where all men are equal. Naturally, he explained, if he went abroad he enjoyed the comforts and accommodation that were necessary for meeting foreign businessmen on equal terms. If there was no such necessity, it was only fitting that he should share the lot of the common man. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘we want you foreigners to fill our first-class carriages and give us your hard currency in exchange.’ He explained that the system in his country now enabled people who studied hard and worked hard to build the country’s economy to gain material benefits for themselves but, in contrast to the capitalist system, it was by far the greater portion of the wealth that any individual generated that went to the state and only the smaller portion went to the individual.

So I sat and conversed in my native tongue with this friendly, intelligent and articulate young man amid the squalor of a second class third-world railway carriage. Mr Li and I exchanged the occasional nod and smile, and the train headed into sunshine and warm weather, as we pulled our chicken apart and devoured it with our fingers. I was not sure at first what to do with the bones. Then I caught on that the thing to do was to chuck them on the floor among the empty beer cans and cigarette ends and sheets of toilet roll with which we wiped our fingers. For dessert we had little pastries filled with syrup. They tasted nice but they made our fingers sticker than ever. We did our best to clean them off with sheets of toilet paper but it would have been good to give our hands a proper wash. However, by the time we had finished eating, the train had run out of water again.

Still the grain-fed, free range chicken was delicious and the good company more than made up for the surroundings and, to be fair, a lady did come round during the afternoon with a big mop and shovel to clear the debris from beneath our feet. It was also a welcome change to be in a free country again. Here I was in a second class carriage of a Chinese train, having a totally uninhibited conversation with a Chinese citizen, and nobody was showing the slighted curiosity about us. It was the sort of situation that would have been impossible in North Korea.

Something else that would have been impossible in North Korea was the sort of music that was being piped through the train, Chinese
adaptations of Western pop music. When I commented on this infiltration of capitalist culture, my friend laughed and said something to the effect that China today wants our Western technology and is no longer averse to some of our culture but, as for our unjust social system, we could stuff that up our backsides.

If I had spent much longer with him he might have made a communist out of me yet, but in the late afternoon the train pulled into his home town of Changsha, the capital of Hunan province. We said our farewells and I made my way back to my compartment.

Changsha is a grim industrial city in south-central China. It has little to recommend itself to the casual tourist but during the cultural revolution, when Mao's personality cult was at its height, Changsha was the Chinese equivalent of Mecca for millions of dedicated disciples. For it was the city where the late chairman studied as a young man and where he first embarked on his revolutionary activities. Although the cultural revolution is now dismissed as something of a national disaster, and Mao is ascribed his share of the blame, he is still honoured for his earlier achievements. And so, as the train pulled out of Changsha, all the Chinese occupants of the carriage left their compartments and stood in the corridor to gaze reverently out of the window upon the river where he used to swim. Very picturesque it looked too, in the light of the setting sun. I continued to look out of the window until the last light had faded from the sky. By that time I was the only person left in the corridor. Once they had dutifully paid their respects, my Chinese companions were not long in resuming their naps or their interminable card games.

Thirty-six and a half hours after leaving Beijing, the train pulled into Guangzhuo station at seven thirty in the morning. I had read that Guangzhuo has a population of three million. It seemed as if every single one of them was crowded onto the station and the square outside at that hour of the day. None of them, unfortunately, spoke enough English to direct me to the China International Travel Service office. When I passed through Guangzhuo again on my return journey, I discovered that if I had only arrived later in the day I would have been positively besieged by offers of help because, with its proximity to the capitalist decadence of
Hong Kong, Guangzhuo has acquired since China’s liberalisation almost as many hustlers to the square yard as Tetuan or Tangier, although as yet they have little to offer except currency exchange. Nor do they as yet indulge in the relentless pursuit of unwilling targets. However, hustlers as a race are not early risers and so I found myself floundering helplessly through the throng for several minutes. Eventually my brain became sufficiently clear to point out to me that there was a big hotel called the Liuhua on the other side of the square. All I had to do was go there and ask directions from the staff. The only problem was getting across the main road. Compared to Guangzhuo, the traffic in Beijing is disciplined. In a few years’ time, when with increasing affluence a large proportion of today’s cyclists become motor vehicle drivers, the streets of Guangzhuo will become as big a nightmare for the pedestrian as those of Cairo. As it was, the only way I could get across the rush hour traffic was to adopt a tactic I had developed in Cairo. I paid no attention to the cars and bicycles. I simply stood beside some locals who were also trying to cross. When they moved I moved, when they stopped I stopped, and I prayed that they knew what they were doing.

Thus it was that I finally made my way safely to the China International Travel Service office. There I booked my return journey to Beijing and was pointed in the right direction to buy my ticket to the city of boundless delight which I had been dreaming about almost continuously for the past three months. Unfortunately at this ticket office they would not accept yuan, only Hong Kong dollars. I had in fact been to the bank in Pyongyang before setting out to try and buy a small quantity of Hong Kong dollars for precisely this sort of contingency. I was informed by the International Trade Bank of the DPRK, a country of twenty million people, that it had temporarily run out of Hong Kong dollars. It is the sort of thing that happens in Juche Korea. Luckily by this time there was one hustler up and about. He led me back into the seething main concourse of the station to a counter where you could buy a ticket for the Hong Kong train in yuan. I was so grateful to him that when he moaned that five US dollars was a paltry reward for ten minutes of his invaluable time, I gave him a pack of Korean cigarettes as well, a
gesture he seemed to find so insulting that he stalked off without another word.

Within the hour I was through customs and on my way on a train of European standard, tired and grubby but bursting with joy, back to the delights of late-twentieth-century civilisation. And the sun was shining! Only a few days ago it had been unsafe for me to step out of doors without my two overcoats and a scarf. In Beijing it was sufficiently warmer for me to shed a layer or two. Now I was down to my shirt sleeves. Although it was still early in the day, I poured myself a Scotch and looked out of the window at the peasants in their straw hats guiding their wooden ploughs in the wake of their water buffaloes and felt jolly pleased that I had been born a bourgeois in an advanced capitalist country.

We returned to the twentieth century as we passed through the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone which the Chinese have sensibly located on the Hong Kong border to act as a buffer zone between China’s third-world penury and the affluence of Hong Kong. And then I was back on British soil once more and civilisation was just a routine customs check away.

Hong Kong proved as idyllic as I had hoped. The weather was fine. The people spoke English. The traffic moved on the correct side of the road and obeyed traffic signals. The streets of Hong Kong were as safe and clean as those of Pyongyang, only these streets were teeming with life and prosperity. The spectacle that Hong Kong presented to me was of an ultra-modern consumers’ paradise in a setting of great natural beauty. There may be an underside to life in the territory but I did not go looking for it. I only had a week and I was determined to enjoy every minute of it. I never strayed from the tourist beat. I was as curious about the underlying social realities of my holiday environment as a typical bottom-of-the-price-range package tourist on the Costa Brava. Hong Kong is renowned throughout the world for the excellence of its oriental cuisine. Personally I ate nothing but Western food all week. I was sick of the sight of rice. Through those dreary weeks of January and February in Pyongyang I could feel my sanity ebbing away from me. After a week in Hong Kong I felt like a normal human being again.
I shared a compartment on the train back from Guangzhou to Beijing with an Englishman who was returning home after working in Hong Kong for eight years. He had decided to send his family back by plane and have a little adventure by travelling home via the Trans-Siberian railway. I asked him if Hong Kong was truly the fully developed society that it had appeared to me to be. He assured me that it was. The shanty towns of the Suzie Wong era have all gone, he told me. Even in the less developed parts of the New Territories people are living at levels well above third world norms, while the sampan dwellers in Aberdeen harbour were by and large continuing their traditional way of life by choice and they owned the basic electronic gadgets, colour televisions and cassette recorders, which contribute so much to our daily lives.

I was fortunate in that the train that took me back from Guangzhou to Beijing was in a different class from the one I travelled down on. The toilets on this one were quite tolerable, the supply of water uninterrupted. It even had a restaurant car which served good, cheap meals. It was not really big enough though to accommodate all the diners. What you had to do to get a table was to calculate which table of diners which had not already been staked out by others was going to finish eating first, then hover over them while they ate, ready to dive into their chairs before they were halfway out of them. Chinese tend to be messy eaters. There was always a pile of spilled food on the table after the plates were cleared away, but each table was covered with a plastic cloth and the waitresses had the knack of wiping the debris off the table into a waiting bucket with a couple of deft sweeps down to a fine art.

It was on the whole a very pleasant journey, but I could not help being conscious of moving back up a class when I climbed into a Korean railway carriage again at Beijing. When the following day, back on Korean territory, the beautiful girl in the tailored uniform came round with the menu and the lovely girl in the crushed velvet dress served the meatballs and fried potatoes in the spotless restaurant car, I had a similar sensation as when leaving China and entering Hong Kong that I was returning to a civilised country. Only this civilised country was an extremely poor and threadbare one. And likely to remain so.
When I arrived back in Pyongyang at the end of March, the sun was shining. It was still cold. The spring had not yet sprung. But it was no longer bitter, bollock-freezing, horrendous cold. It was still what we would class as winter in Britain, but that is nothing by Korean standards. Now, I thought, the worst is over. I had seen off the winter. My holiday had restored me to sanity. From now on I could count down the weeks of my sentence remaining as opposed to counting up the weeks completed. I was cheered to find that my friend Sami had made a safe return from the Lebanon while I was away. In an unjustified burst of optimism that did not survive a fortnight of revising texts, I entertained hopes that I might enjoy the remainder of my stay.

As well as feeling more optimistic for myself, now that the scales of misery and boredom were temporarily lifted from my eyes, I could see again those aspects of the country that had made me fall in love with it when I first arrived seven months previously, although it seemed much longer. I was better informed now and my vision was less naïve, but I again noticed with appreciation the cleanliness and the care for the environment and the orderliness, and once more my heart went out to the people for their gentleness and kindness, their warmth and simplicity. I remember saying to Sami something along the lines that all they needed to create a paradise for the Koreans – it could never, of course, be a paradise for somebody conditioned to a more normal type of society – was a bit of prosperity. Whether prosperity can be achieved in the DPRK without changing the essential nature of the society is doubtful.

Undeniably much progress has been made. The country has been resurrected from total devastation in the war. Living standards are frugal, but the whole population is adequately provided with the basic necessities. The people enjoy a very high degree of security. As long as they behave themselves, they have nothing to worry about. All the children go to school. There is a rudimentary free health service. School,
factory and farm offer facilities for organised cultural and recreational activities.

A constant refrain of the president’s is that for a country to be truly independent, it must be self-sufficient economically, politically independent, and self-reliant in defence. Needless to say, he claims brilliant successes for his country on all three counts. He contrasts the situation in his country with that of South Korea, where the Americans exert a decisive influence on the internal politics, have supreme command of the army, and supply much of the military hardware.

His claims are exaggerated, but not without substance. North Korea is a member of the non-aligned movement and can claim a laudable record over the years for asserting its political independence from the Soviet Union and China. There is a school of thought that the world would be a safer place if North Korea was under Soviet control.

Militarily Pyongyang relies on Moscow for advanced weaponry but, according to an American professor, Edward Olsen, writing in the Far Eastern Economic Review (14/5/1987), ‘still stresses the need to be self-reliance in weaponry via domestic arms production, and in most categories of weapons it is self-reliant’.

By the standards of developing countries, the North Korean economy is pretty self-sufficient. Agriculturally, in spite of limited arable resources due to the predominantly mountainous terrain, they grow enough rice and maize to feed themselves. There have been years when they have had to import additional cereals. There have been years when they have had some surplus rice for export. Lately the food situation has not been so good. The weather has not been conducive to bumper harvests. The population is gradually expanding and, although they have a programme for reclaiming tidelands, there are no other additional arable resources to exploit. I have been told that if they could produce more chemical fertiliser they could increase per hectare yields, but this would be at the risk of exhausting the soil. It is a risk they seem prepared to run. One of the targets for the third seven-year plan, 1986–1993, is to expand annual grain production to 15,000,000 tons. This is the same target incidentally
as was set in the previous plan, 1978–1984. Apart from grain, there is not much else to eat. Vegetables are not abundant.* Their animal husbandry is a disaster. One of the reasons for this may be that there is not enough grain to spare for the animals. There are only 200,000 beef and dairy cattle for the whole country. They have sought expert opinion and been told that the best hope for improving the national food supply lies in sheep. There are at present half a million sheep scattered around the country, but the numbers could be expanded very considerably. Many of the hillsides could be cleared of scrub and seeded with grass for sheep to graze on. Whether there is the political will to make the initial investment and pursue this option remains to be seen. One of the attractions of grain is that it can be stored up for time of war and easily distributed.

Industrially, the policy has been to give priority to the development of heavy industry and emphasis has been laid on the utilisation of domestic raw materials; North Korea enjoys extensive mineral wealth. The Koreans use their indigenous resources of coal and water to generate electricity. They manufacture steel. Korean-built trains run along Korean-built railway lines. Korean-made trucks convey to the sites of peaceful construction Korean-made building materials, including cement which their Hong Kong-based agent once told me is one product they do manage to manufacture to competitive world standards. He added that his difficulty lay in persuading prospective buyers that the cement was of genuine high quality because the general reputation of the country’s manufactured products is so low. In addition to heavy industry, they have sufficient light industry to provide the population with all the everyday necessities: clothes, cutlery, crockery, pots and pans, furniture et cetera. Nothing exciting and nothing of high quality. It may well be that they would do better to manufacture a narrower range of light industrial goods to an exportable standard and to import others. Still, if the rest of the world closed down tomorrow, North Korea could muddle along without it pretty well as it does already. This is no mean achievement, especially when one thinks of the third-world countries which have a

* They catch plenty of fish, but these they generally prefer to export.
precarious reliance on a small number of primary commodities for export. Moreover, although the claim that the North Koreans have accomplished this all by themselves is not only an exaggeration but an act of ingratitude to their allies the Chinese, estimated to have donated a billion dollars in aid in 1987, the Russians, and the other socialist countries, it is true that the Koreans have probably received less foreign aid and technical assistance than most developing countries. Contrast, for example, the maximum of 1,000 Eastern Bloc technicians in politically independent North Korea, population approximately 20,000,000, with 35,000 Eastern Bloc technicians in Soviet satellite Mongolia, population approximately 2,000,000.

If Kim Il Sung’s goal for the country’s economy is self-sufficiency, he can claim to have done quite well. If another goal is prosperity, there is a long way to go and not much sign of getting there.

When talking about North Korean priorities, it should be remembered that the North Korean people are not just ‘energetically engaged’ in the technical revolution to occupy the ‘material fortress of communism’, they are also carrying out ‘the ideological and cultural revolutions to occupy the ideological fortress in accordance with the plan for the complete victory of socialism expounded by the Great Leader Kim Il Sung’ (Korean Review, p. 65). And both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have stressed on numerous occasions that it is the ideological revolution that is of prime importance.

North Korea’s ideological revolution aims at nothing less than the remoulding of man, the creation of a new specimen of humanity, the communist revolutionary of Juche type. Every vestige of bourgeois individualism and selfishness is to be eradicated from the minds of the new communist men and women. They are to be conditioned to find self-esteem and fulfilment not by defining themselves as individuals against the background of society but through merging their personal identities with the collective. The sole aim of all their endeavour is to benefit the collective. Any benefit that accrues to the individual will only be in so far as he is a participant in the collective’s benefit. The Juche revolutionary will be boundlessly loyal to the leader and the
party (in that order), an ardent patriot, a dedicated and uncomplaining worker, well-mannered but proud, simple-hearted and kind. He will have worthwhile hobbies and the morals of a Sunday school teacher. The good revolutionary will be guided through life at every step by the torch of the Juche Idea, which is held aloft by the leader. The torch was originally kindled by the Great Leader who has divine status. The spark of his divinity has been transmitted to his son and heir. He may be expected to transmit it in turn to his son and heir and so on down through the generations.

The Juche state is not a loose economic coalition of individuals and their families like a bourgeois democracy. It is a total institution. The process of institutionalisation begins in childhood, for most citizens when they are admitted to nursery at a few months old, and continues through life. Since returning to England, I have been asked if life in North Korea is like the society depicted in Orwell’s *1984*, where Big Brother is watching you. The answer is that the structure is similar but the texture of life is quite different. I return to the analogy of the vast boarding school where the fatherly leader, headmaster Kim Il Sung, imposes a strict but paternalistically benevolent regime on the pupils in his care. The restrictions are not resented because the people perceive them as schoolchildren perceive school rules, irksome but reassuring, imposed in their best interests by kindly and responsible adults. There is a safe feeling huddled together with one’s peers behind the arbitrary parameters of the rules. Each citizen is not only a pupil of the big school, he is also a member of a House within the school, a school or factory, a co-operative farm or office. Life, both productive and recreational, is largely lived within the sub-institution of the House, which duplicates the ethos of the greater institution, the school.

The actual schools in the country naturally play a crucial role in indoctrinating the young with the collectivist spirit. ‘We must strengthen the ideological education of the pupils,’ Kim Il Sung tells a national meeting of teachers.

‘We must educate the pupils in the spirit of collectivism.

‘Collectivism constitutes the basis of social life under socialism and
communism. In a socialist and communist society the interests of the collective and society include those of every working man and woman; they are identical with those of the working people themselves. It is, therefore, an essential requirement of socialist and communist society that all people should work helping each other under the slogan of “One for all and all for one.”

‘In order to equip pupils with the collectivist spirit, they must first be awakened to the fact that the force of the collective is greater than the force of individualism, that collective heroism is superior to individual heroism and that the organisational or collective life is more important than the private life of individuals. The pupils must be encouraged from childhood to reject individualism and selfishness, to love the organisation and the collective, and devote themselves to society and the people, to the Party and the revolution.’ (cw, Vol. 26, p. 479)

If North Korea is like a school, it is a school with strong religious affiliations. The Juche Idea is like a state religion and the people literally worship the author and embodiment of the Juche idea, Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung.

Religious instruction is an important aspect of a child’s education in North Korea. At school the children are equipped with the ‘collectivist spirit’. They learn unquestioning obedience and unfailing politeness. They are trained to be orderly, clean and tidy. Like schoolchildren everywhere, they acquire numeracy and literacy. They learn to accept responsibility for the collective property; in Pyongyang I often saw children at school sweeping the yard, painting the doors, or cleaning the windows. And all the while they are reading or hearing legends about the infinitely wise, infinitely kind, infinitely brave father leader and learning hymns about him which they chant together as they march through the streets.

When the children leave their organisational life behind at the end of the day they return to another strictly regulated and largely stable institution, the traditional Asian family. In the bosom of their family, they watch television or listen to the radio and are exposed to further indoctrination.
If first priority is given to the ideological revolution, the cultural revolution is by no means neglected. The national literacy rate is high. In accordance with the leader’s instructions, all the children are taught to brush their teeth every morning and wash their feet before going to bed, so that even the ones who live in the meanest of whitewashed cottages look clean and presentable. Adults are encouraged and given opportunities to study in their spare time. Both adults and children are encouraged and given opportunities to pursue creative leisure interests. I met an impressive number of ordinary Koreans who could play a musical instrument; one of my translators played the trumpet, one of the policemen who guarded our compound played the guitar, and of the two girls who served at my favourite bar in the Potanggang one played the flute, the other the violin.

On completing the educational phase of their organisational life, young people move on to the adult institution, the workplace. Not only do they spend long hours working there, it is also the setting for much of their leisure activity. Even on the two major public holidays, the Dear Leader’s birthday and the Great Leader’s birthday, they turn up at the workplace in the morning for fun and games and on the evening before for dancing. On these occasions I watched from my balcony the factory workers in the yard below having volleyball tournaments, three-legged races, and tug-of-wars under the supervision of the tall, distinguished looking party secretary, a man whose authoritative bearing instantly marked him out as someone of standing even though most days he came to work in the same simple clothes and canvas shoes as everyone else.

As the weather grew milder, I started venturing out on my balconies to observe the workers more frequently. Once again I could not help being impressed by how they all seemed to enjoy their working lives. They always looked so cheerful when they arrived for work and they were all, like everyone else in Pyongyang, immaculately turned out; even the manual workers in their dark blues or olive drab working clothes looked clean and tidy and were neatly coifed. When they were told to cram into the back of a lorry to be taken out to the fields, or to help out on a construction site, they all acted as if it was great fun. They seemed
to regard it not as an imposition but as an adventure. Often they would be squeezed on to the lorry for a good fifteen minutes before it was even ready to depart, but I never saw anybody grumbling about it.

Shortly after I came back from Hong Kong, they built a shed on to the side of the factory. One day I watched as a party of young female workers climbed onto the roof of the shed. As she set out on this awkward but not particularly perilous ascent, each girl would give a little pantomime of trepidation, which would be countered by shrieks of encouragement from her playmates. There were hugs and congratulations when she reached the summit. Slowly the numbers on the roof swelled until there must have been about twenty girls up there. They all thought it was wonderfully exciting. Once they were all up, they squatted in a row with their backs against the wall of the factory and did nothing except chatter and giggle and touch one another – North Korean girls are very physical in displaying their affection towards each other. After a while a couple of girls did set to work to perform the task they had been sent up there for: to spread tarpaper down on the wooden roof. No doubt more girls would have joined in and helped except that there were only two hammers and one bowl of nails between the lot of them. It was all perfectly charming, more like watching young children at play than young women at work. It was a typical North Korean scene; sweet, endearing, innocent people, without a clue what they are doing. These people may not be creating much wealth but they have a happy time being together. They are leading the collective life they have been trained for and they know nothing else.

I can honestly say that the citizens of sinister, Stalinist North Korea are the nicest people I have ever met in my life. They were nice to me, and they are nice to each other. The comradeship of the girls on the roof was touching to see and it was the sort of thing I saw all the time. It was touching when I came back from Hong Kong. The interpreters and the domestic staff at the Ansan Chodasso were people who had never been anywhere or had an adventure in their lives. Most were never likely to. Yet, far from being jealous, they were all genuinely thrilled that I had had a nice time. It was the same when I was negotiating over money. The people I negotiated with had a duty to minimise the publishing house’s
expenditure but really they wanted me to have more money, they wanted me to be happy. In view of the frugal lives they had to live, they had every right to be resentful of my demands, but they were not.

In a whole year in Pyongyang, I only ever witnessed a handful of unpleasant incidents. There were a couple of occasions when I saw a scuffle as people tried to squeeze onto overcrowded buses and trolley-buses. It surprised me that this did not happen more often, particularly in winter when tired, underfed bodies, blood sugar levels depleted at the end of a long working day, had to wait in long queues for transport home in sub-zero temperatures. One Saturday afternoon I came across two young men shaping up for a fight in a pedestrian underpass in Chollima Street. Once, walking in the streets, I saw a van driver stop his van and chase after a small boy for no apparent reason. He proceeded to give the child a good hiding until other citizens intervened. On another occasion, walking beside the Potang River, I saw a demented-looking chap hurling big stones at the ducks swimming in the middle of the river. It may be that throwing stones at animals is a national vice. At the zoo I saw several children, and worse, young adults, doing it. Another time I was present when a couple of young drunks barged their way through a crowded platform on the Metro. They calmed down after people gently remonstrated with them. I have seen more unpleasantness in a single evening in urban Britain on a Friday or Saturday night.

I have not forgotten my Chinese friend’s comment that there are bad Koreans but they dare not misbehave. However, it was my impression that it was not just close supervision and possibly a harsh legal code that caused North Korean people to maintain good standards of conduct. I felt there were positive factors at work as well. People tend to behave nicely when they feel all right about themselves, as most Koreans, guaranteed a fairly equal standard of living and a role in society, do. Before I left, there were indications that standards were falling, and I expect them to continue to fall if living conditions continue to deteriorate and disillusionment seeps in. Even so, the deterioration is likely to be a slow process as people’s basic material needs are still being met, nearly everybody shares a common penury and, most important of all, everyone
lives with the feeling of assurance that their needs will continue to be met. Security is the one commodity the citizen of the DPRK enjoys in abundance. Between the support of the traditional Asian extended family and a comprehensive welfare system that guarantees employment, shelter, food, clothes, warmth (up to a point), free education and medical care, no one has too much to worry about. In this traditional Asian culture there are not even the stresses of competing in the sexual marketplace. Most marriages are still arranged, commonly through the intercession of a matchmaker. The party has in recent years been encouraging young people to seek their own partner and fall in love, but so far, I am told, it is only the more highly educated who are responding. One interpreter told me that he was introduced to his wife as a potential partner by one of his friends. They then met a few times and once went for a walk by the river. He knew he had been accepted as a suitable bridegroom when she invited him to join her family on Ancestors’ Day for a picnic by the grave of one of her relatives. He said that prior to the ménage they had never touched, not even held hands, and that he actually would have preferred the girl who introduced them. Different Koreans I spoke to gave equally odd accounts of their courtship. I only ever met one who had enjoyed what we would consider a normal romance with his future wife.

The first book I read on my return from Hong Kong was Eric and Mary Josephson’s famous 1962 compilation of writings on the theme of alienation in contemporary capitalist society, *Man Alone*. It was the first serious book I had attempted in work. During the winter all I had wanted to read were escapist novels, of which Michael had a generous supply to lend me. There is a piece in *Man Alone* entitled *Life in the Crystal Palace*, by a writer called Alan Harrington, in which he relates his experience of working for a big American corporation which offered its staff idyllic terms of service and where promotion tended to be based on loyalty, reliability and seniority rather than on dynamism and initiative, and where it was ‘practically impossible to be fired, unless you drink to alcoholism or someone finds your hand in the cash box’. In this environment, Harrington comments, ‘Every so often I hear my seniors at the corporation inveigh against socialism, and it seems strange. I
think that our company resembles nothing so much as a private socialist system. We are taken care of from our children’s cradles to our own graves. We move with carefully graduated rank, station and salary through the decades. By what marvellous process of self-deception do we consider our individual enterprises to be private? The truth is that we work communally. In our daily work, most of us have not made an important decision in years, except in consultation with others.

‘Good people work here. Since joining the company I have not heard one person raise his voice to another in anger, and rarely even in irritation. Apparently when you remove fear from a man’s life you also remove his stinger. Since there is no severe competition within our shop, we are serene.’

It would seem that, whether in a rich American corporation or a poor third-world country in Asia, it is possible to bring out the nicest qualities in people by giving them security. The other side of the coin may be that, as Harrington goes on to suggest, people lose an edge to their personality under such a benign system. He doubts whether his company could sustain its easy-going, paternalistic ethos if the product it was manufacturing faced stiffer competition in the market place.

Not only are all the citizens of the DPRK granted material security, they are also assigned a role to play and a religion to believe in. People are not susceptible to feelings of alienation because they are united as members of the same congregation with their president as prophet, if not God. Their religion gives them the common cause of fulfilling the Great Leader’s prophecy of a communist paradise on earth through building together the revolution and construction. As in all the most potent religions, the forces of good are displayed against the forces of evil which are incarnate in us imperialism and the South Korea puppet clique. The incarnations of evil are all the more sinister and threatening when they are invisible. No pictures of Chun Doo Hwan, Roh Tae Woo or Ronald Reagan are ever published in the DPRK. Denied human form, these creatures of darkness take on mythological dimensions in the popular imagination, like Satan or Beelzebub.

The Josephsons comment in their introduction to Man Alone:
'Implicit in most approaches to alienation is the idea of an “integrated” man and of a cohesive society in which he will find meaning and satisfaction in his own productivity and in his relations with others. As Emile Durkheim expressed it, man in a “solidaristic” society “will no longer find the only aim of his conduct in himself and, understanding that he is the instrument of a purpose greater than himself, he will see that he is not without significance’.

The North Korea in his highly organised, highly cohesive society, is fortunate to be the instrument of two purposes greater than himself: in the long term, the realisation of the fully communist society; in the shorter term, the achievement of national reunification. The latter is a particularly effective goal in terms of uniting the populace because it is less abstract than the other and appeals to the almost chauvinistic patriotism which seems to be inherent in the national character, and which is played upon ceaselessly by the propaganda machine. The common people still believe what they are told about the lamentable condition of their compatriots in the South, and that if they make sacrifices to build up a mighty national economy, this will inspire the South Koreans to rise up against their puppet rulers and their us masters in the struggle for a reunified Korea under the Great Leader and the banner of the Juche Idea.

Perhaps this sense of mission is another reason why the ordinary manual worker in North Korea likes being at work, even though he is performing the same unappealing tasks as manual workers everywhere. Whenever, years ago in vacations from school or college, I worked at manual occupations, I found that, while it would be an overstatement to say that manual workers actively hated their jobs, nearly all of them regarded their work as a necessary evil and something apart from their real lives, offering no intrinsic pleasure or interest but unavoidable if they were to have a decent standard of living.* The Josephsons would confirm my impressions. They cite a survey of industrial workers that showed

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* With greater or lesser resignation, the worker put himself into cold storage when he clocked in in the morning and resumed himself when he clocked out at night.
‘that for most of them work is not a central life interest. Nor do many of them value the informal associations with fellow workers that jobs offer. Durbin writes: “Not only is the workplace relatively unimportant as a place of profound primary human relationships, but it cannot evoke significant sentiments and emotions in its occupants.” Other observers of factory life have made it abundantly clear that most workers are not happy in their jobs, that they feel trapped and degraded by their working conditions, that they have a powerful desire to escape from the factory, and that what drives them on is the incessant demands of our consumption economy.’

There is no question of North Korean workers being driven on by the ‘incessant demands’ of their ‘consumption economy’. They are at work because they have to be of course, but it would never occur to them to be anywhere else. If they were not at work, there would be nothing else for them to do. On the positive side, being at work they are occupied, they are acquiring immortal socio-political integrity, and they get to have adventures like climbing on a roof or going for a ride on the back of a bumpy lorry with their friends. From kindergarten if not nursery they have lived most of their working lives collectively in institutions. They are conditioned to find themselves among their colleagues in the work institution. Being part of the collective at work is what life is all about. Being a worker carries status in their society. Gifted sportsmen, actors and singers enjoy a modest celebrity in their society but the main heroes, the subjects of media attention, are workers. The state can award no higher honour than that of Labour Hero. In North Korea, the worker is not regarded as a failure or an object of exploitation. The worker is the archetypal hero.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The DPRK has not only been successful in abolishing squalor, primary deprivation, and insecurity. It has not neglected the cultural aspect of people’s lives in terms of educational provision and organised recreation and has created a decent social ambience, within which people can live simple, virtuous hard-working lives and can feel good about themselves and be nice to one another. Sadly the country enjoys no prosperity. It lacks the means to manufacture the material goods that make people’s lives more comfortable and more rewarding. It lacks the money either to import them or to import the technology that will enable it to manufacture them in the future. The national debt is relatively modest, about five billion dollars, but since the mid-seventies it has been incapable of servicing it and, until very recently, has tended to adopt a cavalier attitude towards meeting its financial obligations. North Korea does not ask for debts to be rescheduled. It simply ignores them. As a result it has the greatest difficulty in obtaining any further loans. Given that the majority of the population are quite contented, the country’s economic problems would still not be all that desperate were it not for the obsession with reunification with the South on favourable terms and the related need to try and keep up with looming South Korea.

Perhaps it is the pressure generated by the South’s advances, perhaps North Korean minds are becoming tangled up in their own propaganda. Whatever the reason, North Korea is not displaying much wisdom at the moment in its efforts to get the economy moving again.

The official line in their propaganda is that the economy is brilliant, independent and thriving, and that all the factories are equipped with the latest technology that has been developed by the Koreans themselves, using their own scientific techniques.

The reality is that there is a dearth of sophisticated technological expertise and most of their industrial plant and equipment is twenty or thirty years out of date. Their industry can at a basic level service existing domestic needs but cannot compete in world markets. At the moment
they are investing as much foreign currency as they can lay their hands on in purchasing new technology. Unfortunately, because the official line is that their factories are furnished with all the latest equipment, they are tending to succumb to the temptation of trying to translate their propaganda into reality by buying the very latest, when informed opinion has it that investment in an intermediate level of technology would be cheaper and more in line with their current developmental needs and existing levels of scientific expertise. For example, they recently built an Orlon-spinning mill in Anju, South Pyongan province, complete with the latest in hi-tech machinery. The mill was built under the supervision of engineers from East Germany. The Germans were not optimistic about the mill’s future. They feared that in a few years all the expensive new machinery will be in a sorry state. The machinery needs to be running constantly. In North Korea there are often interruptions in the power supply. In addition, they were sceptical as to whether adequate quantities of raw material could be supplied to feed the machines continuously. They were also doubtful as to whether the local technicians had sufficient expertise to maintain the machinery correctly.

Interestingly, when Kim Il Sung went to Anju to preside over the official opening ceremony at the mill in the autumn of 1987, the Germans were sent away for the day. Was this simply because their presence would have been incongruous when the Great Leader made his stereotyped speech about the notable achievements of ‘our own technicians using their own techniques and local raw materials’? Or could it have been because the ageing autocrat is no longer in touch with what is going on in his country and someone did not want him to know about the involvement of foreign technicians?

The new cement factory built by a West German firm is also blessed with all the latest state-of-the-art technology. A billion deutschmark investment, it is intended to play a vital part in fulfilling the seven-year plan target of nearly doubling cement production by 1992. The West German engineers expressed greater optimism about their factory’s future but, again, the machinery must be kept in constant motion. The Koreans will be hard pressed to provide uninterrupted power to the
factory and harder pressed to do so without diverting energy resources away from domestic consumers.

Someone has told the Koreans that optical fibre cable is the latest thing in the telecommunications industry. Although this is still in the experimental stage in the developed countries, they are hell-bent on squandering their money by trying to use it in expanding their communications network. They even went so far as to set up a factory to try and manufacture it themselves. This predictably ended in a fiasco.

A foreign scientist told me about being taken to look round an office complex somewhere in the north of the country. He was shown a highly sophisticated and expensive computer system that had been imported. Unfortunately nobody had a clue how to use it properly, so they were more or less using it as an adding machine.

Nor will they invest money for their scientific and technical personnel to have proper training. Man is the master, sayeth the Juche philosophy. There is nothing he cannot accomplish if he has the will and the determination. The president has been telling his people for nearly half a century that they must overcome the mystique that surrounds machinery. The official propaganda has it that their standards of scientific knowledge and expertise are nearly as high as anywhere in the world. Therefore local scientists and technicians will be capable of working everything out for themselves if they can just get their hands on the hardware. Consequently, as I was reliably informed, when they are costing possible projects with the United Nations Development Project, the first item of expenditure they always cross off the list is Training and Development. Then their scientists have to try and bridge a technological gap of ten or twenty years by their own efforts or, if they are working alongside foreign experts, try to learn from them in spite of daunting communication difficulties due to inadequate language skills.

North Korea recently purchased from Siemens of West Germany a new international telephone system comprising no less than thirty-two direct dial lines to the outside world. In theory, further lines can be added onto the existing system ad infinitum. The Korean hope was that their technical staff would work it all out and do just that. In practice,
the engineer who installed it did not think they would be capable of maintaining it. Apart from any other difficulties, the instruction manual was in English, a language that none of them understood too well. He probably underestimated their assiduousness and willingness to learn. His boss, who came out later to put the system into commission, was confident that they would be able to maintain it, but as for their adding new lines, well…

If anything went wrong with the system, the Koreans were on their own. They had chosen not to pay for any after-sales service and they were so late in meeting the payments on the contract that the two-year guarantee had expired before the system was even commissioned. Because of North Korea’s abysmal credit rating, Siemens insisted on payment in cash. When eventually the Koreans had saved enough money, an official from Siemens was sent over to Pyongyang to count the banknotes as they were loaded into two containers which were then driven across Asia and Eastern Europe to be handed over at the Czechoslovakian border.

I am sure there are plenty of scientists in North Korea who know that a more modest and realistic approach is called for in updating the economy. I am also sure that they are not in a position to take final decisions and that they have to be careful in making recommendations not to imply that anything is beyond their personal capability lest they be accused of the heinous crimes of ‘passivism’ and ‘defeatism’.

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Apart from all the other problems North Korea experiences in updating its economy, there are some projects which are agreed with the UN Development Project that never get off the ground because export licences are refused for the requisite technology by countries like the USA, Japan and Britain. This is often quite malicious, involving withholding technology that can have no military application. It is also stupid, just the sort of thing to push North Korea into the arms of the Soviet Union, which it has been trying for years to keep at arm’s length.

When the North Koreans are not squandering foreign currency
on ultra-modern technology that is inappropriate to their level of
development, they are supplying raw materials to the USSR in exchange
for obsolete plant and technology. In 1987, they compromised their stance
of political independence by at long last granting the Soviet navy free
access to their ports – an invaluable resource, as Korea’s eastern ports
remain ice-free in winter, unlike those of Soviet Asia – in exchange for
further military and economic assistance.

Another recent money-spinner for North Korea has been selling arms
and munitions to Iran for the Gulf War and acting as a middleman for
the sale to Iran of Chinese missiles. As the Iranian ambassador used to
cheerfully acknowledge, ‘That’s what I’m here for.’

With regard to Korean decision-making, everyone I ever spoke to
complained about how slow and tortuous a process it was and of
frustration at never meeting the people who held ultimate authority.
This is one of the classic problems of an overly rigid and centralised
economy. The problem is likely to be compounded in the case of North
Korea because it is unlikely to be the most suitable people who occupy
the positions of highest eminence and take the important decisions.
In a society in which first priority is explicitly given to the ideological
revolution, which is defined as closely arming every citizen with the
Juche Idea, the monolithic ideology of the Party, it is more than likely
that advancement is dependent upon the ability to parrot the thoughts
of the leadership. In a culture in which the highest virtue is boundless
loyalty to the leadership, one cannot help wondering whether a lively,
questioning intelligence would be more of a handicap than an asset.

I suspect as well that another factor in advancement may be nepotism
if other senior cadres are able to follow the presidential example. Not
only is Kim Il Sung’s son the heir to the throne, his wife is a member of
the central committee and he is rumoured to have many other relatives
installed in high places.

As long as North Korea remains an essentially theocratic society, it
is the priests of Juche, the parrots, be they sincere or cynical parrots,
who will remain in control. Like priests everywhere their judgements
will be influenced more by considerations of faith and dogma than
by reason and pragmatism. They are likely to continue to mismanage the economy. Even if the penny does drop and they start to take some sensible measures, like investing their scarce resources of hard currency in more appropriate and cost-effective technology and delegating powers of decision-making, there will remain considerable obstacles to the country’s economic advancement. Thirty-two direct dial telephone lines to the outside world, assuming they manage to maintain them, is not a lot for a nation of twenty million inhabitants. Although they are building a larger airport in Pyongyang in readiness for the thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students in 1989, there are at present only four scheduled flights a week between Pyongyang and Moscow (two each way), four between Pyongyang and Beijing, and two between Pyongyang and Khabarosk, to supplement the daily train service between Pyongyang and Beijing and weekly between Pyongyang and Moscow. At the International Trade Bank a routine transaction, remitting monthly maintenance payments to the USSR turned out to be an inordinately costly and time-consuming operation. The stage is not set for international commerce on a grand scale.

North Korea has at last been making some effort during the last year to pay off its foreign debts, but it has a long way to go before it can obtain a sufficiently respectable financial status to obtain extensive credits. Until it does, it will have to make do with handouts from the USSR, China and other socialist countries. The legends about foreign loans that the DPRK has quite simply ignored are legion.

On the train journey from Beijing to Pyongyang, I met a Finn who had been sent by his government to try and extract some payment for a paper mill which the Finns had built for the North Koreans some years previously and for which they had so far received not a penny. An elderly diplomat who was travelling with us found his mission highly amusing. He told him the Koreans would throw banquets in his honour all week. There would be lots of toasts to Korea-Finland friendship, but he would be damned lucky if the question of payment was even discussed. He said he had already been warned that this was what might happen. He was determined that there would be no socialising until some satisfactory
financial arrangements had been agreed on. The old diplomat laughed
at this. He told him he might as well make up his mind to enjoy the free
booze-ups because that was all he was ever going to get out of his trip.

The Koreans are enthusiastic advocates of the South–South co-
operation movement. The South–South movement is about developing
countries easing their economic dependence on the advanced countries
by helping each other, offering each other mutual technical co-operation
and other economic assistance such as bartering commodities. A diplo-
mat told me how his country agreed to swap a shipload of mineral
found in his country for a shipload of a different mineral from Korea.
His country fulfilled its part of the bargain. Nothing arrived from Korea.
Remonstrations were made to the Koreans. Their response was that they
were not going to honour their commitment because all they had re-
ceived was worthless dust. They even drove an official from the embassy
to the port where the mineral had been delivered to show him. A pile of
dust was what the official did see. It was a small one, consistent with the
residue that would be left over after the mineral had been loaded onto
lorries and carried away. He pointed this out to them. He asked what
had happened to the rest of the alleged consignment of worthless dust.
He was told that the wind had blown it away.

It would be an overstatement to say the North Koreans are not doing
anything right. As mentioned earlier, they are starting to rectify their
shortcomings in foreign languages, particularly English, and they have
opened the door a fraction to foreigners. To accommodate them, they
have built the Koryo Hotel, a hotel of international standard that does
not contain any images of the Great Leader. Since 1984 they have allowed
joint venture companies to be set up, although so far there have been
few takers apart from expatriate Koreans living in Japan. Strangely, one
joint venture that has been set up is with a French company to build
and operate a hotel in Pyongyang, as if there was not enough surplus
hotel accommodation in the capital already. In recognition of the fact
that they do need the outside world and have to make concessions to it,
interaction between foreigners and locals, although strictly limited by
any normal standards, has been greatly relaxed by theirs. Nevertheless
they are still reluctant to emulate the Chinese example by decentralising some decision-making and throwing the door wide open to basically revitalise the economy by offering foreign capital their cheap labour and facilities in return for investment of funds and access to new technology.

Ultimately the Chinese road is the only road open to them, but as yet they are only taking a few faltering steps down it when they ought to be running. There are understandable reasons for their reluctance to do so. First of all, it could be seen as a dilution of ideological purity. Secondly, it would entail an admission that everything is not as they would have others believe. That would be almost tantamount to abandoning their campaign to con the South Korean working class into thinking they could have better lives in the embrace of the Great Leader. Thirdly, the impact of an open door policy could have a very unsettling effect on the internal situation.

At the moment the masses are contented with their simple lives. One of the reasons for this is that they do not know any better. The indications are that while some Koreans are so cocooned in their ideology that exposure to foreign influences will only have a superficial impact, there are others who, once they have glimpsed alternative ways of living, are bound to start feeling that theirs is a hard, limited and unrewarding life, and wondering if there is any need for it.

Among the interpreters who frequented the international hotels, there were plenty whose faith in their system seemed inviolable. There were others with whom you only had to scratch the surface for intimations of disenchantment to ooze out. Some of them had acquired a very distorted picture of the way the rest of the world lives because nearly all the foreigners they had come into contact with came from the more privileged echelons of their own societies. No matter whether or not contact with foreigners had a significant effect on their ideological orientation, there were few indeed who did not become susceptible to the craving for alcohol, foreign cigarettes, Western pop music and everything else that makes life fun. More and more of them, in the brief time I was there, degenerated into blatant hustlers.

Foreign books were another much coveted commodity. As far as I
could tell from what they have translated into English, their contemporary literature, written under the direction of the Party, consists entirely of naïve tales with a clear ideological message, an uncomplicated plot, and rudimentary characterisation. Some of these have a certain charm. Others are merely pathetic. There may well be a large and appreciative audience for them among the masses of simple but literate workers and peasants, just as there is a large audience in our culture for simplistic literature like Mills and Boon romances. The problem in North Korea is that there is no alternative literature to satisfy the more intellectual members of society.

The big dilemma for the North Korean rulers is that to make any further economic progress they have to trade, they have to get access to new technology, and frankly they need some help. They need to open up. Unfortunately, the wider the door is opened, the more people will find out that the propaganda they are constantly fed is a load of fairy stories. This can only lead to increased discontent. Reluctant to take this risk, they try to boost the economy by asking the people to work harder. They resort to lunatic two-hundred-day campaigns where people are required to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week on a low-protein diet. They have had similar campaigns before: a seventy-day campaign, a hundred-day campaign. But two hundred days is different; just short of seven months of nothing but relentless toil. No matter how high the ideological consciousness of the masses is raised, the body rebels against such demands. So this too must lead to discontent, especially when so much energy and resources are being wasted on absurd prestige projects like the 105-storey hotel and the Angol Sports Village.

North Korea is not a sporting nation but even before it made its bid to co-host the 1988 Olympic Games, Pyongyang already had an Olympic-sized swimming pool, an ice rink, a modern sports hall and the 100,000 capacity Kim Il Sung Stadium. Since then they have been building a 150,000 capacity stadium, a smaller 25,000 capacity stadium, a new swimming complex, and separate gymnasiums for badminton, boxing, table tennis, weightlifting et cetera, in order to substantiate their claim that they could have realistically co-hosted the Olympics. These de luxe
sporting facilities will probably never be used in the immediate future; they will be preserved in pristine condition to show foreign visitors for propaganda purposes. The majority of the facilities were still incomplete when I left Pyongyang in August, just a few weeks before the Olympics were due to start. Whether they could have been completed in time, I cannot say.

What I can say is that their effort to make political capital out of the Olympic issue is typical of the low level of thought that characterises the DPRK leadership at the moment. It is almost incredible that the leadership failed to grasp the simple concept that the Olympic Games are allocated to a city and not to a country. In this context their hopes that all the socialist countries, which originally voted en bloc against holding the Olympics in Seoul, would go as far as to boycott the games over the co-hosting issue were naïve in the extreme. The amount of manpower and resources invested in building the facilities for co-hosting the games could not have been justified even if a significant proportion of the events had been conceded to Pyongyang. The country simply could not afford the expense. When the country's priority is to court international prestige before improving living standards, and two-hundred-day campaigns are imposed on the people, then the country is degenerating into the sort of slave labour camp that prejudiced observers in the West would prefer to believe that it always was.

To whose account must these follies be laid? Given that power resides in the hands of the triumvirate of the president, his son and O Jin U, whose influence can be assumed to be minimal since his ‘accident’, then it must be either the man himself or his son. While I was in Pyongyang, rumour was rife that the president has adopted a largely ceremonial role and left the day-to-day running of the country in the hands of the dear Comrade Kim Jong Il. If this rumour is correct, perhaps the old man should resume the reins of power before the genuine achievements that were made under his rule are irrevocably undermined.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

During the early months of 1988 the focus of DPRK outrage moved away from the South Korean allegations that the North was responsible for the disappearance of the South Korean airliner, to the Team Spirit Joint Military Exercise staged each year in the late winter and early spring by American and South Korean forces.

This exercise has been staged each year since 1976. Each year it has been expanded in terms of duration, scope, and the number of troops involved. 1988 saw the biggest yet. It involved over 200,000 troops over a period of several weeks, plus aeroplanes and warships, some carrying nuclear weapons. The justification for the scale of the exercise was to deter any untoward acts of aggression by the North in the year when the Olympics were due to be staged in Seoul.

When the nuclear weapons the US has deployed in South Korea are left out of the equation, the North may at best be equally matched militarily against the South. Economically it is incomparably weaker and it only has half the population of the South. Therefore it cannot entertain realistic hopes of mounting a successful invasion of the South at this time. I assumed that the Americans for their part had no intention of launching a full-scale war against the North, complete with limited nuclear strikes, in reprisal for any terrorist outrages the North might have perpetrated. In which case Team Spirit struck me as a pretty silly exercise in provocative sabre-rattling.

Predictably the North’s reaction was not exactly the embodiment of good sense and moderation either. Instead of just issuing reasonable protests against America’s behaviour, the Supreme Commander of the People’s Army, ever victorious, iron-willed, brilliant Comrade Kim Il Sung ordered the armed forces on full combat alert. Bellicose speeches were made. The Korean people will retaliate a hundredfold, a thousandfold, against any act of enemy imperialist aggression. Nuclear weapons don’t scare Juche revolutionaries. And every effort generally was made to wind the whole population up into a mood of heroic and
self-sacrificing patriotism. We even had a few evenings of blackouts in Pyongyang to rehearse the civilian population for air-raids. The girls at the Ansan Chodasso thought it was terrific fun, running up and down the stairs, issuing us with candles and making sure our curtains were drawn properly. Fortunately the Koryo was excused from all this nonsense. It became literally an oasis of light in a darkened city. I was able to seek refuge there and have a few beers until the hysteria died down.

By way of compensation, we revisers were able to down pens early on Thursday afternoon to be wheeled down to Kim Il Sung Square to take our places on the tribune at a mass rally. We and the socialist bloc diplomatic community and various other foreigners were presumably meant to represent the progressive, peace-loving peoples of the world who are looking on at the situation on the Korean peninsula with mounting apprehension as the adventurist war manoeuvres of the US imperialists and the fascist South Korean puppet clique exacerbate the tensions to the ultimate extreme. Personally I was not complaining. It is always nice to knock off work early and the whole spectacle was highly entertaining. A large gathering of the working people of Pyongyang had been mobilised to attend the rally. They lined up in orderly ranks like soldiers on parade and listened patiently as five separate speakers made the same predictable noises. They were so predictable that my interpreter eventually grew weary of repeating himself. By mutual unspoken agreement he stopped translating halfway through the third speech. The *Pyongyang Times* reported that the speakers were interrupted by frequent loud shouts from the crowd. This was a distortion of the truth. The crowd was much too well-disciplined and polite to break into spontaneous expressions of passion. They waited until they were cued in by a girl with a shrill voice. Then they all extended their right arms and chanted their support for the Supreme Commander’s communiqué and pledged to maintain themselves in a state of vigilance and full combat readiness. Their responses were as stereotyped as a church congregation chanting the litany.

At the end of the rally by chance I became detached from my colleagues. I decided to station myself at one of the exits to the square where the
A Y E A R  I N  P Y O N G Y A N G

minibus was bound to pass by later. While I was waiting I was able
to take a good look at the people as they left the rally. I imagine that
anyone who saw a film of the rally and heard the speeches would have
formed the impression that these North Koreans are a pretty belligerent
bunch. The contrast between that impression and the cheerful, friendly,
neatly dressed people I saw making their way home could scarcely have
been more marked. Once more a church metaphor came to mind. I was
reminded of a congregation of kindly Christian souls coming out of a
fundamentalist chapel on a Sunday morning, feeling pleasantly smug
and righteous after hearing a particularly satisfying fire-and-brimstone
sermon. Even as I warmed to them, I could not help shuddering at the
thought that there were armed troop loads of such sincere and fanatical
believers lined up all along the demilitarised zone, ready to lay down
their lives rather than submit to the forces of us imperialism – just like
people in our culture who would rather be dead than red. And when I
thought how easily border skirmishes can escalate into full-scale conflicts,
I felt relieved I was going far away from Korea for good in a few months’
time.

A wonderful thing happened to me in Pyongyang in early April. I was
out for a stroll one Saturday afternoon when I became aware that I was
too hot with my overcoat on. After so many months of bitter cold, fear
of the elements was deeply ingrained in me. It took me a minute or two
to take decisive action on my discovery, but eventually I did find the
courage to take my coat off and walk all the way home with it hanging
over my shoulder. The hours passed and I was showing no symptoms
of hypothermia, frostbite or pneumonia. This was it then. Spring had
finally sprung in Pyongyang and I had survived to greet it.

At around the same time, the sixth annual Pyongyang Spring Arts
Festival started. This is a two-week extravaganza when dancers, singers,
musicians and circus artistes from all over the world converge on
Pyongyang and there are shows every evening in the various theatres
scattered around the city. In 1988, there were dancers from India,
singers from Madagascar, jugglers from Cuba and troupes from Siberia,
Mongolia and China. For the first time in many months the Koryo
was like a real hotel again and not just a luxury hostel for German engineers, and the eighteenth floor disco at the Changgwangsan was crowded every night. Recordings of the shows were constantly broadcast on the television during the festival. The same half-dozen shows may have been shown over and over again, but at least they provided something else to watch than propaganda documentaries and Korean feature films.

This isolated gala of international culture in the North Korean calendar is timed not only to celebrate the coming of spring. It also coincides with the most important national festival, the North Korean Christmas, the birthday on April 15th of the great man himself, seventy-six in 1988.

On the Sunday before the birthday we were all taken out to Mangyondae for the morning to join the queue of believers filing past the nativity set and then to visit the funfair. On the following day preparations for the festivities got under way at the factory next door. Icons were set up in the factory yard. One which was typical consisted of a golden-hued painting of the little house at Mangyondae and a poem in praise of the father leader with the date 15:4 displayed in flashing red neon on top. The usual lunchtime games of football and volleyball were suspended in favour of dancing. The dancers form into pairs and stand round in a big circle. There are few mixed couples. Mostly girls dance with girls and boys with boys. In the centre of the circle are an accordionist and two girls who have already learned the steps. When the music starts, the couples move round watching the two girls in the centre in order to imitate their movements. The nearest analogy I can find to contemporary North Korean dancing in my own culture is barn dancing, but this is much more sedate and, it must be said, extremely graceful.

On the evening of the big day the workers return to their factory in their best clothes this time for more dancing. On the day itself, even in the midst of the two-hundred-day campaign to make September 9th, the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Republic, a great festival of victory, the revolution and construction come to a halt. But the workers are still at their workplaces before eight in the morning, as on the Dear Leader’s birthday, for more dancing, tug-of-wars, volleyball competitions and three-legged races. It is all good, clean fun of a sort which would
excite derision from adults elsewhere in the world, but these people love it. They start to disperse around midday. They all go home and have a nice meal with the special foods that have been issued to them for the occasion. They will also be able to have a drink because alcohol will have been released to the shops that week.

April 15th, 1988, in Pyongyang turned out clear, warm and sunny. I went for a stroll around the construction site to get more oxygen to my hungover brain in preparation for the afternoon’s banquet at the Ansan Chodasso. For the first time, at any hour of the day or night, on any day of the week, I did not see a flicker of constructive activity on the whole site.

At the banquet we were honoured by a brief visit from the director general of the publishing house before he went off to attend a more lavish affair with the president. He opened the proceedings with a speech. He said that this was the most important national holiday of the Korean people. The president’s birthday had been declared the greatest national holiday of the Korean people by the Dear Leader, Comrade Kim Jong Il. Comrade Kim Jong Il had thus demonstrated his boundless loyalty to the Great Leader. In the past the Korean people had suffered many misfortunes and humiliations. It was only when they were blessed with a Great Leader that they had been able to extricate themselves from misery and build a new life free from suffering and oppression. I sat there wondering how a grown man could bring himself to parrot such crap, let alone believe it. I kept my thoughts to myself and dutifully raised my glass to the respected leader’s long life in good health.

After the meal, when everybody was somewhat drunk, we had the obligatory round of singing. To ensure that nobody missed a word of the director general’s speech, an interpreter was present for each language group. These were all intelligent people. Each had mastered at least one foreign language. Most had made at least one trip abroad. But all of them, when it came their turn to sing, displayed by the quaver in their voices and the moistness in their eyes as they extolled the fatherly marshal’s virtues, that they had found nothing absurd or childish in the director general’s address.
When the banquet was over, I took myself off on another walk to clear my head again before the evening’s session in the bar. It was a beautiful day still. The apricot blossom was out everywhere and the citizens of Pyongyang were promenading in their best clothes, and the children and students looked exceptionally smart because it is in the run-up to the birthday that they are all issued with their new uniforms for the year – gifts from the father marshal. Ordinary mortals receive presents on their birthday. On his, comrade Kim Il Sung bestows presents on everyone else. Such is the infinite magnanimity of the Great Leader who lives only to dedicate himself to the service of his people.

In the evening by tradition there is dancing by the young people in Kim Il Sung Square. In previous years the revisers had always been invited to observe the proceedings from the tribune. This time, much to Simone’s chagrin, we were overlooked. After supper she and I decided to make our own way down to the square by public transport. It was worth the journey. It was the same sort of dancing as I had been observing all week in the factory yard, except on a much grander scale, and the girls looked gorgeous in their traditional flowing brightly-coloured silk gowns. However, it was all highly choreographed and dancing was evidently by invitation only. There were security men on the perimeter ensuring there was no spontaneous participation by unsolicited spectators. From the tribune the young people would have presented a breathtaking spectacle. Watching from street level, I was not convinced that they were actually enjoying themselves very much.

They don’t like people to stay out too late in Pyongyang, so dancing finished at 8:25pm prompt. Simone and I decided to go for a drink to the nearest hotel, the Taedong Gang. In the bar Simone ordered a whisky. She was told that they did not sell whisky by the glass. If she wanted a glass of Scotch, she would have to buy a whole bottle. We laughed it off and decided to carry onto the next hotel, the Pyongyang, a quarter of a mile away. On the way we joked about how this was the sort of thing you could only encounter in Pyongyang in what was purporting to be an international hotel. It was no longer a joke when we got to the bar in the Pyongyang only to be told the same thing. By this time we were both...
footsore and weary and in need of a drink. The next watering-hole, the Koryo, was half a mile away. Simone resigned herself to buying a bottle. That was not the end of our difficulties. The girl behind the bar only had an English vocabulary of about twenty words. It took Simone the best part of ten minutes to get her to understand that she did not intend to drink the whole bottle there and then, and would she bring the cap of the bottle to our table to enable her to take it with her with she left.

This was typical of the niggling little inconveniences one constantly ran up against in Pyongyang, and which served to aggravate the general misery for the foreigners who had the misfortune to live there. A few evenings before I had gone to one of the bars in the Koryo. When I asked for a beer, I was presented with a bottle of the Korean Ryongsong brand. They do not usually serve this to foreigners there, and I had been expecting a can of imported German or Japanese lager. ‘Don’t you have any other type of beer tonight?’ I asked the girl.

‘Two won, sixty’, came the reply.
‘No’, I tried again
She looked puzzled for a moment. Then she said, ‘Two won, sixty chen, sir.’

When I got back from Hong Kong, I decided to send a thank you letter to the Chinese who had entertained me to a meal on my journey to Guangzhou. I went into the post office at the Potanggang Hotel. It cost one won sixty to post a letter to England, so I naïvely assumed it would cost no more than one ten for a letter to China. The girl told me I needed one twenty. No problem. I went back the next day with exactly one twenty. This time there was a different girl on duty.

‘Where to letter?’ she asked.
‘China’, I replied.
‘China Beijing?’
‘No. China Changsha.’
This evidently confused her. ‘China?’ she asked.
‘Yes. China. Changsha in China.’
‘China Beijing?’

She stood for a few moments in perplexed silence. At last she asked me for one won sixty. I remonstrated with her. I tried to explain that I had been in with the letter the previous day and the other lady had assured me the cost was one won twenty. It was obvious she did not understand anything I was saying, and eventually I gave up.

I was so cross I thought of taking my letter to the International Post Office. On reflection I decided against this. It was not her fault that she neither understood English nor knew that there were any cities in China other than Beijing. And at least like everyone who worked at the Potanggang she could normally be relied upon to be friendly and courteous, something that could not always be said about the staff at the International Post Office.

I made a third attempt to post the letter a few days later. This time I had unlimited funds with me. The girl who had served me the first time was there and the price had gone back down again to one won twenty.

For the great national festival of the DPRK, television closedown was extended to the unearthly hour of 11:15pm. Consequently I was home in time to catch the last twenty minutes of the highlight of the evening’s viewing, a recording of that evening’s show at the Mansudae Theatre where the artistes who had been adjudged the outstanding contributors to the Spring Festival gave a special performance in front of the birthday boy himself. At the end all the artistes came on stage for the curtain call. The camera panned to the president standing up and applauding. The audience and performers applauded together as the great man made his stately exit, accompanied by his best friend, that other notable late-twentieth-century proponent of hereditary monarchy, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia.

It is amazing what constant exposure to propaganda can do to you. Not for the first time I found that the sight of the old man on the television was arousing in me something akin to the emotion I used to experienced whenever Malcolm Macdonald ran onto the pitch at St James’s Park when I lived in Newcastle.

I should add that I was not the only foreign resident of Pyongyang
who was susceptible to these responses, and it was not just the weight of propaganda that accounted for them. However cynical one may be about the grotesqueness of his personality cult, there is no doubting the charisma of this extraordinary man who has survived in power for the best part of half a century. I never met the man personally, but I met a number of people who had. All without exception testified to his extraordinary presence and charm.

The advent of spring and a few more people to talk to of an evening certainly made life in Pyongyang a lot more bearable than it had been in the winter, but Pyongyang is still Pyongyang, a silent, dreary city where one feels to be living in a vacuum, cut off from the local community, isolated from all the normal pleasures and amenities that we in the rest of the world call life, and where nearly everybody who is not Korean feels to a greater or lesser degree disaffected and depressed.

It was nevertheless ironic that, having maintained my mental equilibrium quite successfully until shortly before my sanity-saving trip to Hong Kong, I began to wobble at a time when life had vastly improved and when I was counting down the weeks to my departure as opposed to counting up the weeks I had spent.

There were probably a number of factors which contributed to the decline in my mental state during the later part of April. Perhaps a key factor was that I had dangerously relaxed the siege mentality I had adopted months previously, so that the yearning for things that were impossible, including quite mundane ones like kicking a football or getting behind the wheel of a car, came flooding to the surface. Suddenly having new people to talk and drink with, though very welcome in itself, may have contributed. The people I would hang out with for a day or two, a week or two, even a couple of months, seemed like embodiments of a better life to which they soon returned, while I remained stranded. Another factor was the sheer erosion of the spirit by excessive exposure to the Pyongyang experience, exacerbated by the continued lack of
information about friends and family. My excursion to Hong Kong had been invaluable, but it had not been long enough to fully restore the wellsprings of vitality and optimism. The week when we had to work seven days in a row must also have played a part.*

Working seven days in succession is wearisome whatever one is doing. But seven days sitting at a solitary desk, hour after hour, revising insane propaganda, is not just exhausting, it is downright unhealthy. The tiredness that ensues after doing a worthwhile day’s work with the concomitant gratifications to the ego can usually be dispelled by a good meal, a hot bath and a couple of pints. The torpor that comes from engaging the brain in a futile exercise in buffoonery is not to be shaken off so easily.

Absurdly, it was in a very pleasant social environment, at the end of an oh so singularly full and enjoyable day, that I found myself perilously on the edge of losing my grip. The first of May is a great public holiday in the DPRK, as in all socialist countries. It was disappointing that in 1988 it fell on a Sunday. There was no chance of having the Monday off work instead in North Korea. However, it ill becomes me to complain, because I was given a full day’s entertainment. At the rather early hour of half eight in the morning we were loaded onto a minibus and taken to Mount Taesong beyond the eastern boundary of the city, passing en route the stately and imposing façade of the presidential palace – well you would hardly expect him to live in a tent.

It was a perfect early summer day, hot and cloudless, with just a hint of a breeze. In the morning there was an outdoor entertainment of Korean singing, traditional dancing, and acrobatics. The stage was the Oriental-style South Gate pavilion, not the original – that was destroyed in the war – but a meticulous replica. I doubt if the event will linger in the memory as vividly as the Rolling Stones concert in Hyde Park, but

* The president’s birthday, which in 1988 fell on a Friday, is such a momentous event in the DPRK calendar that the public is given the following day off as well. Then they have to go to work on the Sunday to make up for it. On this occasion the revisers were required to work the Sunday as well.
it was pleasant and colourful and passed the time. It is unwise to expect more than that in Pyongyang. Afterwards we were driven to the top of the mountain for a picnic. The environment was perfect. The weather was ideal. The view across the Taedong River valley, with Pyongyang partially submerged in a heat haze, was stunning.

After a mellow afternoon drinking in the sunshine, we were taken back to the Ansan Chodasso to sober up and change as we were due to attend the state banquet at 5pm. There had been some protests from the diplomatic community about the early timing of the banquet because Ramadan was in progress. This meant that the representatives from Iran, Pakistan, Libya, the PLO et cetera would all have to sit there feeling ravenously hungry while they watched other people gorge themselves. The Koreans dismissed these protestations on the grounds that the banquet was being staged for the benefit of the working classes and not Islam. So I took my place at the bottom table below the Korean generals and politicians and the foreign diplomats and other such typical proletarians, and partook of what, to my pleasant surprise, turned out to be a fairly Western-oriented meal. I actually felt full up for the first time since I left Hong Kong.

Once again there was dancing in Kim Il Sung Square. This time the revisers were on the guest list, so after the banquet we went down there and took our places on the tribune. This time the dancing looked to have a more spontaneous flavour than on the president’s birthday. It looked far less choreographed. The dancers were more numerous. And they were clearly having a lot of fun. But fun is a commodity to be strictly rationed in the workers’ state. It is no good having people staying out late and enjoying themselves when they have to be up bright and early in the morning to build the revolution and construction. So once more the music stopped at half eight, and everyone made their way home.

On the way back I had the minibus drop me at the Potanggang where I found congenial company. It had been as pleasant a day as one could ever hope for in Pyongyang. But as the evening wore on I found myself overcome by acute feelings of unease and distress amounting almost to panic. I noticed that I was drinking too fast and smoking too much, and I
judged that it would not be a good idea to let myself get too drunk in the state I was in that night. Outwardly I must have been comporting myself normally in spite of my inner turmoil up to the moment I decided to leave, because I remember Berndt expressing surprise that I was leaving so early and urging me to have another drink. I reacted to his kind offer as if he was offering me a dose of some lethal drug and not a glass of Johnnie Walker. In bed that night I quieted myself by saying, ‘Tomorrow I will tell them I cannot cope any longer. They must fly me home without delay. They must understand. It does not matter that I have not saved enough money yet. I have to go. I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here.’

By a strange coincidence, the following day was one of those days that came along now and then when the supply of work ran out. I divided the day by immersing myself in a trashy but highly escapist spy thriller and directing a little psychotherapy at myself. I made a list of all the problems I was experiencing in Pyongyang, starting with vague, general ones like boredom and loneliness and moving on to more specific difficulties like unease with people who do not speak my language and sense of failure at having placed myself in such a ridiculous situation. I divided my problems into permanent ones and transient ones. I rationalised to myself the origins of the transient ones and made up my mind that, as I had lived the rest of my life before Pyongyang more satisfactorily than not, I would be fine again once I left Pyongyang, but that I would cope much better with life after Pyongyang if I had some money in the bank. By the evening I had reconciled myself to surviving another four months. I consoled myself with the thought that in two days’ time I was due to go on my first trip outside the city.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

If I was having my share of problems in the late spring, early summer in Pyongyang, I was not the only one having a hard time of it in North Korea. With less than a third of the two-hundred-day battle completed, rumours were rife that the populace was already exhausted. I heard that in the universities lecturers were going into their classrooms, setting the students some work to get on with, and retiring elsewhere to sleep, an example soon followed by their unsupervised students. It was proving impossible for people to teach and learn effectively when all their spare time was taken up with lending a hand on the construction sites, attending rallies, and other patriotic chores.

At the end of April, a party of diplomats was taken on a conducted tour of the sites of the Angol Sports Village and adjacent Kwangbok Street, another major building project scheduled to comprise 25,000 high-rise apartment dwellings, a new Students’ and Children’s Palace, and a new venue for the Pyongyang Circus. A Russian diplomat who went on the excursion was quite distressed by what he saw. ‘You should have seen the state of the workers, Andrew’, he said to me. ‘You could see the pain in their eyes.’

I was prompted by his remarks to take a walk out there one Sunday afternoon to take a look for myself. My impression was that they were pretty weary, but not as bad as he had described. It was the same with the workers who were building the nearby bridge. They were clearly having an arduous time of it, but I did not actually see pain in their eyes. What I most often discerned in their eyes in fact was amusement at seeing me. Most of the workforce in Pyongyang’s construction sites had been imported from the provinces – quite a few of them were soldiers. In the rural areas foreigners are never seen. By this time they had grown used to seeing parties of distinguished foreign guests coming round on guided tours of inspection. A solitary, scruffy European wandering in their midst was a different matter entirely. I was evidently a greater source of amusement to them than the itinerant brass bands who were
sent out in identical work clothes to the builders to provide live on-site entertainment and raise morale. If the builders still derived any pleasure from their performances, it certainly did not show. On the other hand, their faces invariably broke into smiles when they became aware of my presence.

It soon became apparent to me that what was keeping the workers from the point of collapse was that, although they were obliged to spend long hours on the construction site, for much of the time they would be squatting on their haunches doing nothing due to a lack of organisational efficiency, a dearth of essential tools like picks, shovels and wheelbarrows, or a combination of the two. When they were in motion, activity tended to be intense. It was common to see relays of wheelbarrow pushers emptying their loads of gravel into the antiquated cement mixers, turning round, and literally running back for more.

I have to say also that the young workers in the factory next door seemed to be bearing up well and remained cheerful as ever. It may be that as their jobs were in a light industry complex they usually had less strenuous work to do, although often parties of them would be loaded onto lorries at eight in the morning and carted off to lend a hand on the construction sites.

I think that my Russian friend over-dramatised the extent of the people’s suffering. Or it may be me who underestimated it. What remains beyond dispute is that there can be no justification except in times of war or natural catastrophe for asking people on a low-protein diet to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week, week in week out for more than half a year; particularly when their energies are being squandered on prestige projects like the Angol Sports Village, that are quite inappropriate to the country’s level of development and will hardly ever be used.

I remember one afternoon around this time when I was at the publishing house revising the *Pyongyang Times*. Whenever there was a protracted lull in our conversation, while I concentrated on making my revisions, the young translator who was with me kept nodding off involuntarily. He apologised for this and I told him it was only to be
expected as people were having to work far too hard at the moment. ‘You do not understand,’ he told me. ‘We Koreans do not mind because it is for the good of the country. We know we have to make sacrifices to make our economy strong to achieve the reunification of the country.’ I assume he was still living the dream that one day the oppressed people South will see how well the lucky ones in the North are living, and rise up against the us imperialists and the fascist puppet clique. ‘We have had other campaigns before’, he announced proudly. ‘There was the seventy-day campaign and the hundred-day campaign.’

I pointed out that there is a big difference between a one-hundred-day campaign and a two-hundred-day campaign. He switched his tack and asked me if I had seen the new 150,000 capacity Runguado Stadium that was nearing completion on an islet in the Taedong River. ‘Is it not impressive?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It is half as big again as Wembley.’ I felt like adding that they already have the 100,000 capacity Kim Il Sung Stadium, that apart from staging the opening and closing ceremonies of the 13th Festival of Youth and Students they will have no real use for the new one, and that it is an obscene waste of money, manpower and materials, but his sincerity was touching and I did not have the heart. I returned my attention to my revising and he duly drifted off into contented slumber again.

It used to amaze me how many of these translators, who had access to foreign publications and must have had a pretty shrewd idea that economically South Korea is ahead of the North, could not come to terms with the fact that if the South Koreans ever do rise up, it will not be out of envy for the prosperity of the North. And what hopes they pin on reunification! One of my translators once said to me, ‘I do not have a car at the moment. But when my country is reunified, then I will drive a Jaguar.’ This from a Korean who was so well informed that he knew about Jaguars, a species of car not found in North Korea. I later learned that the better informed Koreans are currently fed the line at party gatherings that South Korea is doing quite well economically, but only with light industry. Its prosperity is therefore fragile because it does not have a heavy industrial base and is dependent on other countries
for primary manufactured products, steel, cement et cetera, and in any case much of the industry is owned by foreign nationals. The line is that there are only comprador capitalists in South Korea. If you told these people about the likes of Ssangyong Cement and the Daewoo and Hyundai Shipyards, or that the Seoul stock exchange is closed to foreign investors specifically to retain the ownership of South Korean industry in Korean hands, the chances are they would not believe you.

Now that I was able to walk about freely again without fear of frostbite, venturing further on my excursions, and spending more time socialising in the hotels, I was becoming aware of new developments in Pyongyang. While the bulk of the population were toiling away at their two-hundred-day patriotic battle in exchange for subsistence rations, there were indications of growing affluence and consumerism in some quarters. Wherever I went, I seemed to discover new dollar shops. When I came to Pyongyang I doubt if there were more than ten of them in the whole city. The number had more than doubled by the time I left. These shops are not large affairs. The two largest, the Pyongyang Shop and the Rakwon Shop, each have the floor space of a provincial city Woolworth’s. The others have an equivalent floor space of a typical high street Rumbelow’s or Dolcis. The smaller dollar shops are easily distinguishable from ordinary shops because they have net curtains in the windows to conceal their contents from casual passers-by. There had been no dramatic influx of foreigners to account for the sudden mushrooming of dollar shops. Therefore it is safe to say that they were there because more Koreans have more red won to spend. Michael once told me that when he arrived in March 1987, there were still more foreigners than locals patronising the dollar shops. This had been reversed by the time I arrived. By the time I left, there were more than twice as many dollar shops, usually full of people, nearly all of them local. To an extent the crowded shops could be misleading. Not all the Koreans were in there making purchases. They love to stand and marvel at all the exotic treasures from the mythical world outside, watches and canned meat, Japanese tv sets and tape
recorders, potato crisps and jewellery, bottles of whisky and bright plastic buckets – the shops tend towards the eclectic in their range of merchandise. However, if the shops were congested with spectators, there were still plenty of people buying. Some of the shoppers are repatriates from Japan who have brought their savings. There are others who have relatives living in Japan or in other overseas countries who send them gifts of money. There are Koreans who have been sent abroad on business, and brought back hard currency. There are some, like taxi drivers or hotel employees, whose line of business brings them into contact with red won. There are Korean restaurants, the famous dog meat restaurant for example, where the prices are the same in red money as in ordinary money. If a foreigner is taken to the restaurant by his guide and pays in red won, it is a racing certainty that the waitress will pocket the red won and substitute her own ordinary won for the price of the meal. Or, if she is not in a position to do this, that her manager will. I know that the girls in the Rakwon Shop are paid in red won. An interpreter was paying court to one of them and explained that this was the reason why. It may be that as Japan becomes more prosperous the Koreans living there are becoming more generous in their donations to their relatives in the homeland, but I doubt if this alone would account for the increased amount of red won in circulation, which there must be or else the shops would not be there. It is not implausible that at a time of economic crisis, the loyalty of high officials is being secured by permitting them a more luxurious lifestyle. Another indication of rising affluence for a small select minority was the increase in the number of cars on the roads.

It is now thirty-five years since the end of the war. Yet in 1988, the people were being asked to make possibly greater efforts and self-sacrifices than in the desperate days of post-war reconstruction. I was assured by old Korean hands, people from the socialist countries who had learned Korean and studied at Kim Il Sung University ten or twenty years ago and who have been coming back ever since, most of them in diplomatic capacities, that although the people now have better clothes to wear and consumer items like black-and-white TV sets, in other respects, e.g., food supply, their living standards have declined. While the majority
endure their selfless toil in blissful ignorance that any other way of life than theirs is possible, there are more and more in Pyongyang who do realise that there is another world. In the past few years since the Koryo has been built and the door pushed open a fraction, more people have been exposed to the influences of the outside world. People have glimpsed the toys that the rest of the world plays with and they want them too. For most of the population the war and the Japanese occupation, no matter how often the newsreels from those eras are shown on the TV screens, are not memories but history. They have never experienced deprivation and they grow weary of austerity. It should not be surprising then that some people should have become dissatisfied, particularly when they see that for the elite everything is possible while they have nothing.

Nevertheless I was very surprised at the rumours of deviance and corruption that were circulating in Pyongyang in the spring of 1988. I heard of a diplomat’s wife who had her purse snatched while out shopping. A diplomat told me that he came out of the Koryo one night and found a Korean sitting in his car. There was a smell of what he took to be cannabis. The man was in such a state that he did not seem aware of what was happening to him, even when the hotel’s security men were taking him into custody. There was a spate of slashed tyres and other acts of vandalism against cars parked outside the Changgwangsan Hotel. A hotel guest was approached by the manager and asked if his bill could be automatically reimbursed by his company when he got home, and if so, would he like to pay more than the standard tariff and split the difference with the manager. Incidents such as these were unheard of six months previously.

Meanwhile more and more of the interpreters, guides and drivers were scrounging more and more blatantly for cigarettes, alcohol and other gifts. The scroungers were still a minority but they were an expanding minority, and becoming more and more demanding. The standard line when I arrived was, ‘I once interpreted for a man from your country. He was a very kind man. When he left he bought me a bottle of brandy and two hundred cigarettes.’ Now many of the guides and interpreters were constantly asking foreigners for things outright from the day they arrived.
Some foreigners described the continual harassment as a nightmare. False expectations may have been aroused by those who had dealings with Japanese businessmen come to explore joint venture opportunities. The Japanese have taken over from the Americans as the world’s plutocrats and they tended to lavish gifts and hospitality on their guides and interpreters, thus generating expectations that less wealthy visitors could not meet.

I am not suggesting that Pyongyang is about to degenerate into a hotbed of crime like New York or a nation of hustlers like Morocco, but in 1988 the cracks in the strict Juche code of morality were visible.

Fortunately the disease did not spread to the staff at the Ansan Chodasso. There our friendly and efficient handyman typified the norm. Whenever I had to call upon him to mend my air conditioner or put mosquito nets up at my windows, it was always necessary to go through an elaborate pantomime of how offended I would be if he did not accept in order to press a few cigarettes on him. Old hands assured me that ten years ago all Koreans were like that.

* *

It was shortly after midnight, a few minutes into Thursday, May 5th, when I boarded the night train to Kaesong. I had been in Korea for eight and a half months and, apart from my holiday to Hong Kong, this was the first opportunity I had had to leave the confines of Pyongyang.

A reasonable case can be argued that North Korea’s transport regulations which forbid anyone to make a journey within the country without obtaining a warrant from the local People’s Committee is less of a gross infringement on personal liberty than a fair and rational means of allocating scarce transport resources. I never saw a passenger train in Korea that did not look pretty full. Some of the girls who worked at the Ansan Chodasso came from outside Pyongyang. Every year they enjoyed a week’s holiday at home for which they were issued with travel permits and rail tickets. I have no doubt that in the event of one of their parents falling seriously ill or some comparable family crisis, hasty arrangements
would have been made for them to make another visit. But for my part I never again want to spend time in a country where it is not possible to put your hand in your pocket and go wherever you want, whenever you want.

It should be added that restrictions on travel and communication are a very effective means of social control. Disgruntled elements in Pyongyang cannot share their disgruntlement with disgruntled elements in Wonsan or Chongjin, or discuss ways to translate their disgruntlement into political action, if it is physically impossible for them to make contact with each other. Even if somebody has a car, and there are very few of those in private hands, permits are required to drive outside specified confines and there are security checkpoints on all roads.

As I have said, North Korean trains tend to be full. The 12:15am to Kaesong was not an exception. Every carriage was packed except for the one luxury sleeping car at the rear of the train which had been laid on specially for the comfort of us foreigners and our interpreters. When Michael had taken the train to Kaesong the year before, he and his two interpreters had had a whole carriage to themselves. It is standard practice for interpreters to escort foreigners in pairs, I expect so that each can monitor the other’s behaviour. On my trip to Kaesong, the carriage was relatively crowded. There was a lady from the Philippines who had been brought over by the United Nations Development Project to advise the Koreans on mushroom cultivation. And there was our party from the Ansan Chodasso, consisting of myself, Holmer, Astrid and their daughter Linda. We just had two interpreters between all of us, one English speaking, the other a German specialist who had a fair command of English. The English-speaking interpreter was a gentleman called Kim U No who had been living at the Ansan Chodasso as resident interpreter since January. So most of us already knew and liked one another, there was hardly any language barrier, and so we made quite a jolly little party. We foreigners were all dying to get away from Pyongyang for a few days. Our Korean friends who seldom in their lives have the opportunity to go anywhere were delighted to be accompanying us.

The privilege of foreigners was not confined to the provision of a
special sleeping car. It was only as a privilege that Linda was being allowed to travel at all, because at that time there was a ban on travel for all people under the age of twenty-five. Such a prohibition would cause a public outcry in most countries. In totalitarian North Korea people accept it, and in fairness, it was another restriction on personal freedom that had some justification. There had at that time been an outbreak of cases of scarlet fever in the country. The authorities were anxious to prevent an epidemic. They could not afford the drugs to treat the disease. They did not want people having to stay at home to care for sick children or young adults having to miss work through illness, particularly in the midst of a two-hundred-day campaign. Was this ban a violation of personal rights or sound and sensible policy on the part of a struggling third-world country? That it could be construed as anything but the latter did not enter the mind of the person who told me, who would not otherwise have said.

Travel is not express in North Korea. It is only 140 kilometres from Pyongyang, yet the journey takes nearly six hours. Even allowing for the many stops this is slow going. We arrived at Kaesong at six in the morning. At the station a minibus was waiting to convey us to the hotel.

Kaesong is a lovely ancient city. In the middle ages it was the country’s capital. It is actually below the 38th parallel, a northern gain from the war. Eastwards it was the South which gained territory. Because of its geographical situation, Kaesong escaped lightly from the bombing compared to the rest of the country. Consequently Kaesong and its environs contain a large number of historic buildings and monuments that are intact, and there are many old houses in the traditional Korean style, tiled whitewashed cottages like the ones that have been built in Pyongyang, but these older dwellings showed more diversity in design and some were distinguished by attractive doors and window frames. Holmer is of course an authority on Korea and had been to Kaesong on several previous occasions when interpreting for East German delegations. On the way to the hotel he started to point out all the sights to us. ‘Look, there’s a pagoda from the Koryo period, that pavilion over there dates from the Li dynasty.’ I joined in, pointing to a mural portrait of the president on an official building and saying, ‘And
there’s an early Kim dynasty mural.’ Personally I thought this was quite a witty remark but it was received with a resounding silence.

However, it had obviously been heard and understood. Later that afternoon we visited the site of an ancient palace. There was little left to see except the foundation stones. Kim U No began to explain how the palace had been destroyed by the Yankee bombing until Holmer corrected him, informing him that it had in fact been destroyed in a fire several hundred years ago. In the surrounding fields Holmer and Astrid, with Linda’s assistance, were finding shards of ancient celadon pottery. This seemed like a good game so I decided to search too. I found a broken saucer and brought it to Holmer for inspection. ‘That is no good’, he said. ‘That was made recently. Throw it away. Anyone can see that’s an early Kim.’

The hotel at Kaesong was pleasant but basic. It was conceived as nothing more than a base for sightseeing. There was not even a proper bar, although it did have a counter where you could buy a can of beer or a bottle of Russian champagne. In true North Korean style this counter was always open when we came down for breakfast at eight in the morning, and closed when we came down for dinner in the evening.

The first stop on our itinerary was Panmunjom inside the 4,000 metre demilitarised zone, divided in the middle by a line of concrete markers right across the country to denote the border between North and South. Panmunjom is the place where the armistice that ended the Korean War was signed in July 1953. A short drive from there we came to the hut that straddles the demarcation line where the two sides from time to time engage in futile dialogue. Beside the hut, in one of those ludicrous vignettes that sum up the hopelessness of the human race, North Korean human beings in military uniform stand to attention on one side of the line while American human beings in a different colour uniform do the same thing a few feet away when they are not busy taking lots of photographs of me for the CIA files. When we had been shown round and were having a cup of insam tea, the officer asked if there were any questions. I asked him whether, as the soldiers spend several hours daily almost within touching distance of the GIs, with whom they must become quite familiar, any human contact ever developed,
any exchange of greetings, nods and smiles. He assured me that both parties carried on as if the other had no human existence whatsoever. They ignored each other completely. However, he went on, on the odd occasion when South Korean guards are present, then his men do try to engage them in conversation and offer cigarettes to them. But should a South Korean soldier make any response, he will not be seen again on that particular duty.

Two days later we were taken to the border again, this time to an observation post on the North’s front line from which we could observe the concrete wall which the South has built across the whole width of the peninsula. Apparently the air is usually loud with the sound of artillery as military manoeuvres are rehearsed, but we went on a Saturday. At weekends silence and sunshine prevail. There was even a lull in the propaganda war. Both sides are usually assaulting each other’s ears through elaborate loudspeaker systems. I asked our guide what sort of things the South say to them. He told me that they say that the North is a bad place to live and people in the South have a much better standard of living. As I looked through the telescope he directed by gaze to where they had mounted a cut-out of a car with an attractive Korean lady in traditional dress in the passenger seat. They tell the North’s soldiers that this is what they could look forward to if they came over to the South. He shrugged his shoulders in magisterial disdain. I had to admire his attitude, but personally, after eight and a half months in Pyongyang, I was sorely tempted to make a run for it across the demilitarised zone right there and then and bugger the minefields!

In between our two trips to the front we had the opportunity to visit quite a number of other interesting places in and around Kaesong. We saw a beautiful, thousand-year-old iron statue of the Buddha, Shakyamuni, whose serene and humorous face is indelibly stamped on my memory. There was apparently some reluctance to let us see this. But for Holmer we would not have known of its existence. The statue is housed in its little pavilion in a district of old tiled cottages. I would guess the official concerned relented on the grounds that we were actually living in Pyongyang and would already know that not everyone in North Korea
resides in modern apartment blocks. Soon they will be able to display this magnificent statue without embarrassment as they are planning to move all the historical relics in the area to be housed in the ancient buildings of Koryo’s mediæval university which they were in the process of renovating when we visited. I find this rather a shame. It will make life easier for the tourists they are keen to attract, but I like the idea of beautiful things remaining in their time-honoured settings within the community. As well as the iron Buddha, they will be transferring all the exhibits from the existing museum which we also visited. The present museum is situated halfway up the hill from which the mandatory towering bronze image of the Great Leader looms over the city. Our guide informed us that it was the Dear Leader (born in 1942) who decreed that there should be a museum in Kaesong. Ten minutes later she told us that the museum had been set up in the days of the Japanese occupation.

We paid a visit to the tomb of King Kongmin and his queen. He was a 14th-century ruler of Koryo, the feudal state that existed until 1392, when the founder of the Li Dynasty seized power and changed the country’s name from Koryo to Chosen. The twin tumuli are set on the top of a hill with tall mountains in the background. The approach to the summit is terraced. On the upper terrace stands a row of haunting statues of soldiers and courtiers keeping guard over the tomb. It is a marvellous spectacle that deserves more visitors.

On the second day of our excursion we were taken to a well-known beauty spot, the Pagyon Falls, for a picnic. On a ledge to the side of the falls were situated two picnic tables. One of them was fenced off by a little chain link rail. Once the Great Leader and the Dear Leader had visited the falls together. They too had had a picnic on this very spot at this very table, which had henceforward taken on holy significance and was no longer available for the use of mere mortals like us. We sat down and took our meal at the table next to it. The view was just as good. We even had a free cabaret. A part of elderly peasant women had also gathered there for a picnic, squatting at the foot of the waterfall to eat their rice. When they had finished eating, the old changgo drums were produced and they started prancing around with graceless abandon. As far as I could
tell, the drummers were just thumping their instruments at random. My ears could discern no rhythmic pattern at all. This deficiency did not seem to bother these geriatric gyrators with beatific grins on their faces. I thanked Kim U No or his good intentions, but explained that when I had been nagging him the night before to produce some Juche dancing girls for my entertainment, I had something a bit different in mind.

After our meal we climbed up the steps beside the waterfall and took a long walk along the banks of a stream through some of the loveliest countryside of rugged green hills that I have ever seen, at Holmer’s insistence straying far beyond the paved route normally designated for foreign visitors. On the way we passed one of the rest houses that the Great Leader has set up out of his warm solicitude for the working people’s recreation. It was deserted at the time so we took a peek through the windows at the dormitory accommodation. It contained proper beds so was probably accounted luxurious by local standards, but as it contained nothing else and the beds were barely six inches apart, it looked pretty spartan to me. We did not have a look inside the outdoor lavatories. We could smell them well enough from outside. On our way back we found a party of holidaymakers had now taken up residence. I asked Holmer to enquire if they were all from the same factory. It turned out that they all came from different factories. It was probably safe to assume then that these were model workers who had been sent there as a reward for overfulfilling their quotas. I have no doubt they were well pleased with their reward, but I would have had something to say to the travel agent if I ever ended up in accommodation like that.

If we saw one, we must have seen thirty amateur artists out sketching watercolours of that countryside that afternoon. They had little tins of paint such as we give small children for Christmas presents, and old tin cans to put their water in. Some of them were very talented. It is the sort of healthy, cultured leisure activity the party encourages and there is much to be said for it.

Holmer knew these two ancient Buddhist temples in the vicinity. The local peasants going about their business were surprised to see Europeans straying from the usual tourist routes. They were even more surprised
when Holmer opened his mouth and asked them directions in their own language.

We contrived to miss the first temple on our way out. As a result we arrived at the second temple first. It consisted of three buildings in a walled compound. Two of them were evidently inhabited. I imagine people were allowed to live there in exchange for maintaining the actual temple, which was just an empty pavilion but very clean. Comrade U No, who has lived all his life in Pyongyang and hardly ever been out of it, began to wax lyrical about how he would like to retire eventually to live a simple contemplative life in such a remote but beautiful valley, far from the madding crowd and all that, until I pointed out to him that there was no electricity and it would not be a lot of fun in the winter trudging down to the stream, pickaxe in hand, to break the ice in order to have a wash in the morning. That shut him up.

We contrived not to miss the first temple a second time on our way back. This was just as well because it was a lovely one, dating from the seventeenth century, on the site of a previous temple that had been destroyed by fire. It was memorable for the beautiful patterns painted on the walls and ceilings and the three gilt Buddhas it contained. We asked the caretaker if it was still in use. He replied that old people still came there to worship, but no young ones were interested. There was another statue of a Buddha in a nearby cave and a trough of water so clear that you could not see it at all until you disturbed the surface with the aluminium drinking bowl.

Apart from having an extremely enjoyable trip, I came away from Kaesong with two overriding impressions. The first was of the disparity between the propaganda and the reality of North Korea. The disparity is also apparent in Pyongyang, but there it is less immediately obvious than in the countryside.

Kaesong is a lovely old city. It is clean and well maintained, but its wide roads have scarcely any traffic. You are as likely to see a bullock cart trundling along the street as a motor vehicle. Beyond the city the roads are in a dreadful state of repair.

For years the president has been stressing the need to mechanise
agriculture and free the peasants from their backbreaking toil. For months I had been revising articles stating that this will soon be achieved. The reality is that the most common form of tractor to be seen in the vicinity of Kaesong was the truly Juche tractor, the one that is made in Korea, fuelled by indigenous resources, and from time to time manures the soil as it moves along. There are indeed a million of these sweet and ponderous machines in operation in the DPRK. Although I believe that the country’s achievements in irrigation are, generally speaking, commendable, I did see one chap carrying water out to a small field in two buckets suspended from a wooden pole across his shoulders. Although there were some post-industrial-revolution type tractors and rice transplanting machines on view, the fields were thronged with peasants all working jolly hard performing their tasks by hand. It was not the picture of the Juche agriculture displaying its might that the authorities like to paint.

My other overriding impression was that when all is said and done, this was third-world Asia and, viewed from that perspective, the reality is nothing to be ashamed of. Everybody seemed to be pretty cheerful and, unlike the adult population of Pyongyang, who frequently stare at foreigners as if they are animals who have strayed from the zoo, down there they all smiled when they saw you. Rather like the builders on the construction sites. Whenever we went past in the minibus, they used to stop work to wave at us and were highly delighted when we waved back.

In the countryside – and in Kaesong itself really – the people were basically living the same simple peasant lives as their ancestors, but because of those measures that have been taken to improve the country’s agriculture, and because the Koreans seem to have proved more adaptable to collectivised farming than the Chinese, the grain supply is more reliable than was known in former generations. Also, under the communist system the people have far more security in the event of illness or other personal misfortune than they ever had in the past.

The two young women I saw washing clothes in a stream are not likely to have their photo taken like that for Korea or Korea Today. Nevertheless,
they possessed the same smart blue smock as every other female child in the country. They were able to attend school, and there they would acquire the rudiments of good personal care and routine and probably become literate enough to read *Rodong Sinmun* and charming anecdotes about the peerless great man, the worship of whom will fulfil all their spiritual needs.

These people exude contentment and bonhomie. Naturally it does help that they do not know anything better. Even the world on the other side of the frontier just a few miles away is a closed book to them. Lest those who own or have access to a TV set should ever be tempted by curiosity to break the law and tune in to South Korean broadcasts or, far more pernicious, the American Forces Network, the government comprehensively jams all transmissions from the South. I know because I pressed every channel on the TV in my hotel room.

Kaesong itself has more of a rural than an urban feel to it, in spite of its 100,000 population. The city has no heavy industry. We were able to sample its light industry on a visit to the embroidery institute. The institute’s products are on sale in all the dollar shops and hotels in Pyongyang. I always found them quite attractive but people who know about these things used to be disparaging of them and add that they were overpriced. We were received at the institute by the director and a manageress. We were shown two rooms where the embroiderers were at work. Usually I feel uncomfortable when being shown round places where people are at work. I feel as if I am being placed in a role of superiority which I do not relish. But these ladies seemed so pleased to see us that for once I failed to feel embarrassed. Almost certainly, like everyone else in North Korea, they will be working too long and too hard – in their case at a task which I imagine is better performed in short bursts of concentration. However, the working conditions were pleasant and the atmosphere very amiable and relaxed. I was told that they worked on piece rate and that the average monthly salary was 110 won, with one or two exceptional workers earning as much as 250. I was assured that even the slowest was capable of earning eighty per cent of the average.
Out for a walk, we came across a party of kindergarteners enjoying a picnic lunch in an ancient pavilion. It was a charming, happy little scene, marred only for me by a degree of embarrassment when one of the teachers insisted I sample a Korean delicacy, a little sweet rice cake that was green in colour because it had been smeared with grass. I knew it would be revolting, and it was. I took a tentative nibble and could not go on. Comrade U No, who seemed amused by discomfiture, assured me that no offence would be taken if I threw it away which, having no alternative, I reluctantly did.

Another interesting place to which we paid a visit while we were in Kaesong was a rather novel hotel that was under construction. The hotel consisted of a complex of, if I remember correctly, seventeen newly-built tiled cottages in the traditional style, except that there were fitted luxury bathrooms suites and ornate wooden screen doors and little yards with high walls where people could sit outdoors in privacy. A little footbridge over a stream gave access to a main building which was to contain restaurants, bars and other amenities. The concept was that people could enjoy a holiday living in the traditional Korean manner, with all the appurtenances of modern living thrown in, and doubtless this will hold considerable appeal for the Korean expatriates coming over from Japan.

One can only assume that the two-hundred-day battle was raging away behind the façades of Kaesong’s empty, sun-drenched streets for there was no outwards sign of frenetic activity anywhere. The prevailing atmosphere in the city of calm and tranquillity was evident in the attitudes of the builders of the hotel who were going about their business slowly and methodically – and looked as if they were going to make a damn good job of it. In Pyongyang, when the workforce is not squatting around idly, everything is done at a rush. Consequently the upper floors in the Potanggang Hotel are uneven, the electrical wiring in the Koryo I am told would not pass safety regulations in the West, and the finished buildings in the Angol Sports Village looked less impressive than their design models.
It was evident in the summer of 1988 that the DPRK is keen to develop its tourist industry. I realised this when I was called upon to revise a number of leaflets from the Korean International Tourist Board. At the moment tourism in North Korea is on a small scale and almost exclusively confined to visitors from Eastern Europe. These people simply do not have the money to spend, so there is little profit in it for the government.

The Koreans are now so anxious to attract hard currency spenders from the affluent capitalist countries that they are advertising in their leaflets that anyone who has any difficulty in obtaining a visa before departure can be issued with one on arrival at Pyongyang airport. What the person who translated the text for the leaflets actually put was that passports could be obtained at the airport. I felt this was a little over-generous, so I took the liberty of amending it to visas. It is quite likely that neither translator nor author would understand the distinction between a passport and a visa even in their own language.

Typically the North Koreans, who go round in a different orbit from the rest of the planet, are clueless as to what is likely to appeal to the outside world, they have no idea how to market their product, and they have not properly researched what other countries do to promote tourism. They probably had not even thought where they were going to send their leaflets once they were printed. Undoubtedly North Korea will attract a trickle of visitors, people who want to go somewhere different out of curiosity, but the Koreans will have to brighten their ideas up if they want to turn that trickle into a flood.

I did my best to help them by trying to make their leaflets more sensible. For example, wherever they promised ‘three meals a day’, I changed this to ‘full board’. When they exhorted, ‘Golfers, Come to Korea, and play a few rounds on the country’s brand new and only golf course,’ I changed the sentence: ‘The course has eighteen holes, nine in and nine out,’ to something on the lines of ‘It is a challenging new course that winds its way through the most delightful scenery.’ I had no guarantee of course that they would not change it back again.

If the author of the leaflet was so entirely ignorant of golf not to
know that all standard golf courses have eighteen holes, he did not reveal noticeably greater knowledge of his own country’s indigenous pursuit, Taekwondo, in the leaflet he composed for the special Taekwondo study tour they are offering. Another special holiday on offer is a month in Pyongyang learning the new alphabetic dance notation which a team of North Korean researchers has recently invented and hope will revolutionise the study of dance around the world. The leaflet for this holiday modestly claims, ‘As people once considered it the greatest honour in life to go to the place where musical notation was invented [where was that?] to learn how musical notes can be written down, so now they consider it the greatest honour to come and study in Pyongyang, the birthplace of the world’s first comprehensive alphabetic dance notation.’

It may be that the Koreans have conducted extensive research and located a potential market but I cannot imagine there are many wealthy people wanting to spend five weeks on the shores of Lake Sijung having their ‘genital disorders’ treated by mudpacks.

To be fair, they do claim that the slimes of Lake Sijung are efficacious for many other ailments as well. There is a set price for this holiday but it does not include the actual cost of treatment. An application of a mudpack to a part of the body will cost 25 dollars. Applications of mudpacks to the whole of the body will cost 50 dollars. A full mudbath will send the punter back 75 dollars a time.

Realistically, the country does have some tourist potential on account of its scenery. There must be plenty of people who would enjoy a quiet holiday somewhere unusual amid beautiful scenery and lovely people. There is already an infrastructure of hotels: a luxury hotel at Mount Myohyant and tourist-standard hotels at Mount Myohyant, Mount Kumgang, Kaesong and the coastal resort of Wonsan, but they will have to do something about the bone-shaking roads if they are to satisfy the expectations of sightseers who have paid a lot of money to come, and about the quality of the food in the hotels. Other people assure me that the Korean cuisine in these places is fine, but I always ordered European fare which was usually mediocre or worse. At Kaesong, I ordered French
fried potatoes. They were served me as if they were an hors d’œuvre at the start of my meal and they were stone cold and greasy.

There are holidays on offer to the celebrated centres of natural beauty and at quite reasonable prices. The only thing is, transport to and from the country is not included in the cost. Prospective holidaymakers have to make their own arrangements for getting to North Korea and it is neither a particularly cheap nor easy place to get to. The leaflets for the sightseeing holidays were also poor. They were probably written by someone who had never been to any of the places he was purporting to describe.

One group of visitors who will be going to North Korea are the participants in the 1989 World Festival of Youth and Students, an estimated 20,000 of them. Preparations for the event are so far advanced that leaflets were already available in June 1988. The Koreans did not have the sense to pass the English language ones to me for revision. People who read them will be most amused by the quaintness of the expression, the bad grammar and idiosyncratic phrases like ‘drastic drugs’ and ‘sultry publications’ among the list of ‘Goods prohibited to take in and out’.
I returned from the brief trip to Kaesong feeling slightly rejuvenated. I noticed that now that the trees were all in leaf and the flowers were in bloom and the balconies of the flats were decked out with potted plants, Pyongyang had shed the vast drab council-estate aura that had enveloped it through the winter and was again the attractive city I had seen when I first arrived.

I noticed that the workers in the factory had turned the lower beds alongside the buildings into rivers of colourful flowers. ‘I see the workers here are treating their workplace like a palace,’ I remarked to Comrade U No.

‘I think’, he said, ‘you will find most of the factories in North Korea like this one. The working people in my country take a pride in their jobs.’

Perhaps it is pride, as well as ignorance, that keeps them going. They certainly seemed to be bearing up well as the two-hundred-day lunacy approached the halfway mark. Once I was going by underground from the Taesong Gang hotel up to the Koryo at about nine-thirty one evening when I saw the party secretary from the factory coming up the escalator as I was going down. His tall shoulders were stooped. His face was pale and drawn. His eyes were downcast and vacant. The next morning when I drew the curtains at half past seven, there he was, bright as a button, out in the yard, already mingling with the workers and demonstrating the prescribed Juche popular work style and method with all his customary energy and enthusiasm.

While the workers next door were doing their best to make their workplace a palace by planting pretty flowers round the yard, the staff of the Ansan Chodasso, including the interpreters and the young women who cleaned our rooms and waited at table, were out of doors displaying the true Juche spirit of self-reliance by cementing over part of the compound themselves under the direction of the manageress. If the spirit was commendable, the results were disappointing. After heavy rain a pool of water inches deep gathered in the middle where the concrete had not set evenly.
Around this time a regular visitor to Pyongyang said to me, ‘I have never known a people who work so hard or achieve so little. It doesn’t matter whether it’s handicrafts or bridges. Everything they make is rubbish.’

As the two-hundred-day campaign crept towards the halfway mark, I too embarked on my own more modest hundred-day campaign. My campaign was to hang on to the last vestiges of sanity for another hundred days and nights in Pyongyang. It may not sound like much, but every monotonous day had to be ground out hour by hour, minute by minute. My work was as pointless and uncongenial as ever. The food was no more to my liking. Indeed the quality of the meat seemed to be deteriorating. Michael told me there were meat shortages in the city’s restaurants. After the brief flowering of international culture during the Spring Festival month, the television was back to the routine grind of propaganda and banal feature films in an alien tongue.

One night I decided to stay in and remain reasonably sober for a change. Unfortunately the night I chose was May 17th. May 17th is the anniversary of the notorious Kwangju massacre in South Korea in 1980. On that date the people of the city of Kwangju took to the streets in protest against the government’s imposition of martial law. Because of the scale of the protest, the authorities sent in troops to restore order. According to official figures, between the 17th and 23rd of May 191 people were killed in the crackdown. The opposition claims the death toll was nearer to 2,000. Predictably the North Korean propaganda harps on about 5,000 dead and 14,000 injured. To commemorate this tragic event, on May 17th a mass rally of students was staged in Kim Il Sung Stadium and broadcast later that evening on both channels. I watched in fascination for a while as the next generation of Juche high priests ranted out the clichés in emulation of their elders with rapt, fanatic expressions on their faces. There was the usual cued-in ritual chanting of slogans from shrill-voiced groups of female students. After half an hour I had had as much as I could take. I fled to the Potanggang to get drunk again.

While their parents were all out working their butts off to make the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the republic a great festival of victory, in May the schoolchildren of Pyongyang took to the streets in
uniform red track suits to start practising skipping, marching, gymnastics et cetera, sometimes until eight o’clock at night, in preparation for the mass games scheduled to crown the September 9th festivities.

Koreans used to tell me the mass games were an original invention of the DPRK. The Russians told me it was a Soviet invention. They hold one every year in Pyongyang on one or other of the festival occasions. In 1987 they held on April 15th in honour of the president’s seventy-fifth birthday. In 1988 they held it on September 9th. Consequently I never saw one, which is rather a pity because everyone assured me they are quite something.

The mass games are, as one would expect, a celebration of the beauty and grace that mass collectivity can attain, a grandiose spectacle in which no individual is allowed to shine but each makes his anonymous contribution. By all accounts, even spectators who regard the concept of the thing as rather vulgar cannot avoid being impressed and strongly moved. The mass games are performed by children, thousands of them. The average number of participants in the mass games is 50,000. It is doubtful if many mentally and physically normal children in the DPRK go through school without participating in at least one mass games performance, although it was once whispered to me that the children of high officials sometimes use their parents’ influence in order to get out of them.

In Pyongyang the mass games have traditionally been held in the 100,000 capacity Kim Il Sung Stadium. From now on they will probably be staged in the new 150,000 capacity Runguado Stadium. Mass games last for an average two hours. They consist of a series of changing pictures. A background image is formed by children who occupy the whole of one side of the stands and create successive vast mosaics by holding up different sheets of coloured paper on cue. Music is piped through loudspeakers. Out on the pitch, there is marching, gymnastics, dancing, all choreographed à la Busby Berkeley, but on a scale Berkeley could only dream about. Apparently each mass games performance has a unified theme running through it, although there is no attempt at narrative.

All the interpreters I asked said they had taken part in a mass games performance while at school. Most of them said the preparations were
hard work but the experience had been worth it. I cannot imagine English children and teenagers giving up most of their free time for months on end to rehearse the same mechanical actions over and over and over again until they all move as one with the precision and synchronisation of guardsmen on parade.

On the last Sunday in May I was taken on an outing along with Holmer, Astrid and Linda to visit the West Sea Barrage at the port of Nampo forty kilometres away. The West Sea Barrage is an eight-kilometre long dam that stretches across the mouth of the Taedong River, where it flows into the West Sea of Korea – known to the rest of the world as the Yellow Sea. It contains three locks of various sizes. The largest can admit the biggest of ocean-going vessels into Nampo Harbour.

The barrage has afforded the Koreans a number of advantages, of which two are of prime importance. It facilitates sea traffic in and out of Nampo, North Korea’s principal West Sea port, negating the effects of the dramatic tide fluctuations that have frequently left vessels stranded, and thereby also preventing flooding inland. In 1969 the country suffered horrific flood damage as far inland as Pyongyang as a result of violent tides forcing their way up the Taedong River.

The barrage, which measures thirty metres in height from the sea bed, was built over five years from 1981 to 1986 by three divisions of the Korean People’s Army without any significant foreign technical assistance.* For a third-world country it constitutes a very impressive engineering achievement. Being North Korea it is a flawed achievement. Whether because the coffer dam was not built high enough to take sufficient impact of the heavy waves, or because they quite simply built it like

* It is said that the Dear Leader took a close personal interest in this project but, as it has actually been built, the engineers evidently paid little heed to his advice. For, according to the June 1988 edition of Korea Today, ‘He advised that in order to finish the barrage construction in a brief span of time they should disregard establish practice and formulæ and carry out the designing, the surveying of the sea bed, and the construction, simultaneously.’
everything else in too much of a tearing hurry, it has required continuous renovations and repairs virtually since the day it was completed. Along the top of it run a road and a railway. The road is normally open but because parts of the track are always dug up to allow repairs to the dam’s structure, the only time a train has ever run across it was on the day it was formally inaugurated by the president.

In itself it was certainly worth a visit, but the real pleasure of the outing lay in doing the sort of thing that at home one takes for granted, i.e., getting in a car on a fine Sunday morning and going somewhere. It was a glorious feeling just to leave Pyongyang behind for a few hours and to be out in the countryside where everyone was hard at work in the fields doing the rice transplanting. The rice transplanting season at the end of May and beginning of June is a crucial time for North Korea’s agriculture. There are not enough peasants to do all the work and so the whole of the urban population, factory workers and office workers, students and even schoolchildren, are motivated to lend assistance to the countryside. They are transported each day by bus, train, or on the backs of lorries, except for those assigned to help in the more remote areas who may have to live for up to a fortnight in spartan village dormitories. Even our privileged staff at the Ansan Chodasso had to take it in turns to go out and help in the fields for a day. By all accounts it is gruelling work, but, being North Koreans, many of the city-dwellers quite enjoy the outing and the change of scenery.

As we drew near to the barrage, we found that the road was under repair. In any sensible country, when a road needs repair, one carriageway is repaired at a time so that the other is left open for traffic. Here, for a stretch of a hundred yards, they had dug up both carriageways simultaneously, so that all the traffic had to edge its way over broken rocks; a brief journey that probably put as much stress on the vehicles’ suspensions as 10,000 miles of normal motoring. It was while we were edging our bone-shattering way across that I noticed something quite disturbing. Among the toiling gang of female road workers shifting heavy stones were a couple of toothless, grey-haired grandmothers. North Korea is such a strange country that the possibility that these old ladies
had not been mobilised for this work but had volunteered for it out of patriotism cannot be discounted. Having said that, they did not look as if they were enjoying themselves. I was used to seeing stooped old women in Pyongyang doing manual jobs like sweeping the roads, but this was something else again, and left a bitter, angry taste in the mouth. The following week Michael made the same journey with Simone, and reported seeing a young woman working there with an infant strapped to her back.

At the barrage we were met by a guide who delivered a set eulogy about it, peppered with the usual attributions to the Great and the Dear Leaders. Holmer excelled himself as a linguist by giving a simultaneous translation from Korean into English, so that both Astrid and myself could follow it. Our guide, however, was not given the opportunity to run through her full agenda. We had an agenda of our own. Holmer had made several previous trips to the barrage while interpreting for delegations and knew there was a bathing beach underneath the lighthouse, and so we had all brought our swimming costumes. If our guide felt at all offended by our cutting short our inspection of the engineering wonder of the modern world in order to go swimming, she was too polite to let it show.

It was not a particularly hot day and the sea had yet to warm up after the long winter but, inspired by little Linda’s fearless example, we all braced ourselves and took the plunge. It was too cold to stay in for long but the air was clear, the water was clean, and for a few delightful minutes we felt as free as anywhere in the world.
In early June the nation passed the halfway stage in the two-hundred-day campaign. In spite of everything, whenever I observed the factory workers from my balcony or took a walk round the construction site, they all looked to be bearing up quite well, although obviously their lives had been reduced to an interminable routine of eat, work and sleep. On the other hand, life in the DPRK does not offer a vast deal else under normal circumstances.

One thing that it does offer is education, albeit most of it education in the Juche idea. I saw the most extraordinary sights. A man reading a book as he trudged across the construction site with an A-frame basket of heavy rocks strapped to his back, literally studying while working. A group of construction workers sitting cross-legged on the ground around a tree to which a cadre had nailed a blackboard, an instant outdoor classroom.

One night Sami and I were on our way home from the Potanggang. As we mounted the dike that separated the grounds of the hotel from the construction site of the bridge we saw about a hundred people digging in groups of three, standard practice in North Korea. One person holds the shovel. A length of rope is tied to the shovel. The other two members of the trio each hold an end of the rope. The person with the shovel pushes it into the ground. The ones holding the ends of the rope help him pull it out again. In this way a hundred people would toil all night to accomplish what a man with a bulldozer could do in half an hour. Sometimes they used to sing. Sami produced his torch and we picked our steps across, avoiding the puddles. Then we stooped under the barrier at the site entrance where there was a watchman’s hut with a light outside it. On this particular night two young men were keeping watch. There was nothing for them to watch out for. Criminals are almost as rare as tigers in Pyongyang and everyone comes and goes at will across the construction site. There is no potential shortcut anywhere in North Korea outside the militarised zones that does not become a public thoroughfare. In those days, though, it was advisable to take good note of your surroundings as
you made your way to the Potanggang in daylight, as the thoroughfare altered daily with the advance of the construction. That way you reduced your chances of disappearing down a hole or sinking ankle-deep in mud when you made your way back again pissed up in the pitch darkness. These two watchmen were not wasting their time as they kept watch over a public thoroughfare. Using the light on the hut as a reading lamp, one of them was reading aloud from a book to the other who murmured solemn assent to every sentence. I asked Sami if he knew what was being read from. He told me it was a book of famous quotations from the president. Bible study on the construction site at midnight.

The number of projects that were being vigorously carried out during the two-hundred-day campaign was putting a strain on the nation’s electricity supply. From time to time there were power cuts. On the first Sunday in June, electricity and water supplies to our district were severed for several hours. We foreigners were not at all pleased. The people on the construction site, however, were overjoyed. They all had a legitimate excuse to sit around idle in the sunshine for a few hours. There were not many opportunities like this for them in the summer of 1988.

The following week a team of girl students in their green uniforms appeared each day either in our street or on the path beside the river to practise for hours on end a graceful marching routine with wicker baskets of plastic flowers and strips of flowing pink chiffon under the implacable eye of their instructress, who walked alongside them carrying a portable cassette recorder. As the crocuses herald the spring, the appearance of these girls marked the onset of preparations by Pyongyang’s adult population for the great march past the tribune on the morning of September 9th before the children took the spotlight for the afternoon’s mass games. I was unable to imagine British undergraduates putting up with this sort of thing under public scrutiny. Even those born and bred Juche students seemed to feel they had outgrown such antics. Or perhaps they only felt embarrassed when there were foreigners around observing them.

Earlier in the year the South Korean students had proposed a meeting with their northern counterparts to discuss issues related to the reunification question, like the North’s demand to co-host the Olympic
Games and a proposal to hold an athletics meeting between the students from both sides. The North Korean students were keen to attend such a meeting and received official encouragement. The date of June 10th was designated for initial talks at Panmunjom. On that date the North’s representatives arrived there at the appointed time and waited two hours. South Korean students were refused permission to attend, but a number of demonstrators set out anyway. When they came to the bridge that gives access to Panmunjom they were stopped by troops. The North Koreans saw this as a propaganda coup. In my opinion, if the American and South Korean authorities had had any sense, they would have let the meeting take place. It might have given these passionate young activists in their designer jeans and sweatshirts a jolt to encounter in the flesh their northern peers, with their school uniforms and peaceful lives of simple virtue.

On a personal note, the most cataclysmic event in Pyongyang in early June was an overnight doubling and in some cases trebling of the price of liquor in the dollar shops. I was more glad than ever that I would soon be leaving. About the only redeeming feature of living in Pyongyang had been the availability of reputable brands of Scotch at five or six dollars a time. Vodka was even cheaper. Presumably a side-effect of Mr Gorbachev’s crackdown on domestic consumption, from early 1988 half-litre bottles of Stolichnaya were selling in Pyongyang for just over a dollar. Suddenly, in a concerted hike by all the shops simultaneously, a bottle of whisky that cost ten and a half won one day was twenty-four won the next. The Stolichnaya jumped from two won forty chen to four won eighty. Fortunately there were only a matter of weeks left before my release date and, being a cautious sort of person, I already had half a dozen bottles of Scotch and four of Stolichnaya in my cupboard. Also, the hotels were rather slower to raise their prices. I immediately bought two additional bottles to be kept behind the bar with my name on them at the Potanggang before the disease of inflation infected my local. I suppose that instead of responding to the crisis in this way I might have made it a pretext to moderate my drinking. I have always entertained a fondness for alcohol and there are probably three or four occasions in an
average year when I go over the top and cannot recall all that happened the night before. By this time this was happening three or four nights a week, and there was not a single night when I went to bed sober. But I never seriously considered cutting back. I preferred the prospect of alcoholism to depressive psychosis.

The price of cigarettes also rose dramatically. A pack of Rothmans or Dunhill jumped from one won fifty to two won forty. Rothmans International leaped from one won seventy to four won fifty. Luckily these rises did not affect me so much. The only time I used to buy imported cigarettes was when I was taken on a trip. The rest of the time I made do with the local grade II cigarettes I was given free each day as one of the terms of my employment. As far as I know there are three grades of North Korean cigarettes. If there are grade four or grade five cigarettes, I dread to think what they are like. In the first grade are a range of cigarettes which are on sale in the dollar shops and hotels to impress the foreigners. These are not bad, although not of good enough quality to compete on the world market. The brand I used to be issued with, Pak Ma (White Horse in English), were a grade two cigarette. These are not generally available to foreigners. They are smokable and that is the best that can be said for them The locals consider them a luxury cigarette, and indeed they are in comparison to the working man’s Grade III untipped cigarettes, which are vile.

To be fair to the North Korean tobacco industry, and to put things in a proper perspective, Pak Ma are superior to the popular indigenous cigarette of India, Charminar, and even the humble Grade III cigarettes are preferable to a bidi.

It was around this time that rumours were circulating that the supply of cigarettes to the locals had been curtailed in the interests of public health. It seemed a cruel blow to deal to the working man in the midst of his two-hundred-day carnival of toil.

I have stated how drastic the June price rises for alcohol and tobacco were. I ought to add that I was referring to prices in red won. The price increases for holders of the humble blue won were far, far worse. Our Russian colleagues at the Ansan Chodasso were horror-stricken. Our
Cuban and East German friends could only console themselves with the thought that they were very nearly at the end of their contracts.

Around the middle of June I received another batch of comedy scripts to revise from the Monty Python crew down at the Korea International Tourist Bureau.

Perhaps some joker from Planet Earth had seen their brochure for the month-long medicinal mudbath holiday, taking the slimes at Lake Sijung, and had rung up to make an ironical inquiry. Whatever it was, something had inspired them to take the concept one step further and offer a twenty-eight day package holiday for those wishing to receive traditional Korean medical treatment.

In principle this need not be as ridiculous as it at first sounds. When I was in Hong Kong I read that the people there, who are nobody’s fools, use the public Western-orientated health services for some ailments and the private traditional Chinese medical sector for others. I myself was treated effectively, if slowly, largely by Eastern methods. Astrid once sprained her ankle. The only thing a Western-trained doctor can do for a sprained ankle is to bandage it up tight and tell you to try and keep off it for a few days, while Doctor Time works his course. Astrid was taken to the Foreigners’ Hospital for one treatment of acupuncture. It was all she needed. Relief from pain was instantaneous. And within twenty-four hours the swelling had entirely subsided and she was on her feet again as if nothing had ever happened.

There must be plenty of well-off people in the world whose lives are blighted by chronic health problems that are not responsive to conventional methods of treatment. In principle it ought not to be too difficult for the chaps at the Tourist Bureau to get in touch with an expert on Korean medicine and find out what precisely are the ailments which are more responsive to traditional Asian than to modern Western medicine and what traditional methods can realistically offer specific illnesses in terms of cure or relief, and then use the information to turn out an intelligent leaflet or brochure and work out where to target it.

If, say, arthritis is less intractable when treated by traditional Asian methods than by Western drug treatment, they could target a leaflet at
associations for arthritis sufferers in the West and offer free trials initially to a small number of patients in order to gain publicity and establish credibility for future commercial ventures.

In practice they do not have the slightest idea about marketing their products to the outside world, and probably would not know the term marketing if they read it in Korean. They probably have no clear idea what they are to do with their leaflets, how and to whom to distribute. I do not suppose it ever occurred to them to go and talk to a doctor about what Korean medicine genuinely has to offer. As far as these chaps are concerned, all the propaganda that has been churned out about the wonders of traditional Korean medicine in recent years since the country can no longer afford to import decent quantities of modern drugs is absolutely true. So they turn for their information to their internal propaganda, and proudly announce that if you receive ‘manipulative [hand] treatment’ only once or twice, ‘invertebral synarthrosis, myositis of lumbar nerves, spondulosis, deformative spinal arthritis, brachial plexitis, scapular polyarthritis, intercostal neuralgia, lung and various muscular pains can be cured completely’. Of course some ailments take a little longer to clear up. It takes forty days to get rid of those ‘acute pains from blood vessels’ under the famous ‘Nanchinai Treatment’ and a full sixty days for the same treatment to do the trick for ‘arterial sclerosis and presbyopia’. Pity the holiday is only for twenty-eight days.

No price is quoted for this holiday. Perhaps the price is dependent on the nature of the illness and the requisite treatment. They are evidently not expecting visitors to be too incapacitated, however, because in addition to receiving treatment, a full programme of outings is included in the package. The ailing tourist gets to visit the International Friendship Exhibition at Mount Myohyang, the Pyongyang Maternity hospital, the zoo, and even to get bounced around like a beach ball on the bumpy road to Panmunjom.

The other new inspiration from the chaps at the Korean International Tourist Board was the Wedding Tour, as I rechristened it, the Honeymoon Package. So if you are thinking of getting married soon and you have not yet seen the leaflet, this is what North Korea has to offer you:
**Itinerary 1 (Five days and four nights)**

First Day: Arrival in Pyongyang. Warm reception with congratulatory flowers. First meal served with champagne in the hotel room.

Second Day: Tour of Pyongyang. Visit to the old home in Mangyondae where President Kim Il Sung was born. Relax in the Mangyondae Pleasure Park.

Third Day: Visit to the Pyongyang Metro, a crèche and a kindergarten. Relax in the Taesongsang Pleasure Park. Visit to a Koreans’ wedding hall.


Fifth Day: Return home.

A snip at $723 a head even if you do have to make your own travel arrangements to Pyongyang. If the prospect of a visit on your honeymoon to the Pyongyang Maternity Hospital and a ride on an oriental tube train has whetted your appetite for more, you can pay $945 a head and have:

**Itinerary 2 (Eight days and seven nights)**

First Day: Arrive in Pyongyang. Warm reception with congratulatory flowers. First meal served with champagne in hotel room.

Second Day: Sightseeing tour of Pyongyang. Visit to the old home in Mangyondae where President Kim Il Sung was born. Relax at Mangyondae Pleasure Park. Watch artistic performances.

Third Day: Relax at Moranbong Park. Visit to the Pyongyang Maternity Hospital, a crèche, and a Koreans’ wedding hall. Depart for Mount Myohyang by train.


Fifth Day: Visit to the Pohyon Temple. Rest or visit the beautiful Manpok Valley. Depart for Pyongyang after dinner.

Sixth Day: Relax at the Taesongsan Pleasure Park. Visit to Pyongyang Metro and the Pyongyang Students’ and Children’s palace.

Seventh Day: Visit to the West Sea Barrage and the Pyongyang Handicraft Institute.

Eighth Day: Return home.
If you are looking forward to having supper on a lake in a flower-bedecked boat, do not go between the end of October and the beginning of April or you will be boating on ice. If you go in July or August, watch out for the monsoon. Needless to say, the author of the leaflet did not consider such details worth mentioning.

No religion would be complete without its quota of shrines, relics and holy places. If the nativity set at Mangyondae is the Mecca of the Juche religion and the Museum of the Korean Revolution its leading cathedral, the manipulators of consciousness in the DPRK have been assiduous in establishing other holiday shrines across the country to help strengthen the bonds of religious servitude.

The most famous outside Pyongyang is the International Friendship Exhibition at Mount Myohyant. This is where the gifts which visiting heads of state and delegations and notable fans from abroad have presented to the leadership are stored and displayed. But there are many others: the secret camp on Mount Paekdu, the Pocheonbo Revolutionary Battle Site, the Ponghawa Revolutionary Site dedicated to the legendary revolutionary activities of Kim Il Sung’s father Kim Hyong Jik, and the Chilgol Revolutionary Site dedicated to the memory of his mother, Kang Bong Sok. Until recently Kang Bong Sok rejoiced in the title of Mother of Korea. From now on she will have to settle for being the Grandmother of Korea, as her erstwhile title has lately been usurped by the president’s late first wife and mother of Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Suk, who has her own statue, museum, revolutionary site, straw thatched nativity set, and sundry other sacred relics installed in her native town of Hoengong.

More recently a number of monuments and revolutionary sites dedicated to the Dear Leader have been established. As yet these are not being advertised to foreigners, but I did get to hear of one in Pyongyang city so I took a ride out on the underground one Sunday morning to Ryonmotdong overlooking the main road from Pyongyang to Ryongsong to take a look.
This site is associated with the historic widening of the road in 1961, a task entrusted to the students at Kim Il Sung University when Kim Jong Il was in attendance. According to Kim Jong Il’s official biography this was a time when, ‘inspired by Kim Jong Il’s personal example, many of the students performed exemplary and laudable deeds. When, by accident, there was a leak in the sewage pipe during excavation at a work site, the men plugged the hole with their bodies, singing a revolutionary song and competing with each other in the struggle.’ (Kim Jong Il, The People’s Leader, Vol. I, p. 288)

The site features the humble cottage where Kim Jong Il lived while leading his fellow students in the construction work and a kindergarten to which he once paid a visit during that period. The kindergarten is now a museum. One room contains nothing but a circle of tiny wooden chairs on which it is said the children used to sit, but one of them has a specially upholstered cover because it is the one upon which the Dear Leader sat as he gave dazzling on-the-spot guidance to the kindergarteners. The other room contains photographs and drawings of the young Kim Jong Il mingling with the workers and students. One of the photographs has had Kim Jong Il’s head superimposed on the original so clumsily that it was obvious even to my untrained eye. There are also such sacred relics as the plastic coat which he took off one stormy night and gave to a soldier who was helping on the road-widening project insisting, out of his magnanimous spirit of boundless self-sacrifice and warm solicitude for the people, that it was he and not the soldier who should endure the scourge of the elements. There is also the original bucket that he took from an old lady and insisted on filling with stray scraps of coal from the construction site for her.

By a happy coincidence it was on Mount Maeng, a picturesque hill just on the other side of the road, that Kim Jong Il used to engage in military manoeuvres during his military service. Miraculously preserved there among other marvels is the sniper’s emplacement which he occupied while leading, guiding and inspiring his comrades. There need be no confusion at to which emplacement was Kim Jong Il’s. It is the only one there. All the rest have been washed away by the elements over the years.
If all this sounds as silly to you as it does to me, I ought to add that the party of Korean women who were being herded round while I was there all seemed to be taking it perfectly seriously.

I do not know whether the country was anticipating trouble with the run-up to the Olympics, or if it was just becoming more combat-conscious as June 25th, the thirty-eighth anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, drew nearer. For whatever reason, our pretty doll soldiers, the people’s guards from the factory next door, seemed to be out in the street at some point during every day now, doing bayonet drill. It has to be said they were somewhat lacking in ferocity, but they were very graceful and balletic. They seemed to find it all a bit of a giggle but maybe they were just embarrassed when the foreigner joined the regular audience of junior schoolchildren who sat along the kerb watching them.

When the little samurai returned to their sentry posts, alternative street cabaret would often be provided by the burgeoning array of female undergraduates, sometimes as many as fifty of them, marching up and down the road learning their complicated routine with their baskets of artificial flowers and pink chiffon streamers under the steely eye of their martinet instructress.

While the people’s guards prepared to safeguard the revolutionary gains at the cost of their blood and the youth and students rehearsed endlessly for the September 9th celebrations, and the rest of the population were absorbed in the two-hundred-day campaign, corruption was becoming rampant among those privileged and informed enough to become disillusioned. It was less than three months since foreigners had started returning to the hotels again in any numbers after the winter closedown, but more and more visitors had more and more complaints about guides, interpreters and drivers sponging off them on a scale that would have been quite unheard-of less than a year previously, when I first arrived. People were being bombarded with demands for gifts all day long. South Koreans were ordering alcohol and cigarettes from hotel
or restaurant and putting the charge on their client’s bill without his knowledge.

One businessman from the Middle East arrived with a couple of dozen watches and Parker pens he had picked up cheaply in Dubai to distribute as a goodwill gesture. This proved to be a dreadful error. The people he was dealing with immediately formed the false impression that he had a bottomless bank account. Consequently, from the day he arrived his wallet was under continuous siege. The Koreans were quite shameless about begging from him. One to whom he had given a ladies’ watch told him the next day that his wife liked it very much, and asked if he could have another one for his daughter. One evening he entertained some of them to dinner at the Ansan Club. He was shocked at the end of the evening to be presented with a bill for six hundred dollars. He was puzzled that an undistinguished meal in a third-world country could set him back a hundred dollars a head. I asked him if any of his guests were carrying away parcels when they left that they had not had when they arrived. He replied that they all were. I explained to him that each of them, and probably the driver too, would have screwed him for about fifty dollars’ worth of cigarettes and alcohol. I also dispelled any hopes he might have had that the largesse he was distributing, both wittingly and unwittingly, might exert a positive influence on securing a favourable contract. One of the frustrations that foreign businessmen encounter in dealing with the DPRK is that the people they are physically negotiating with are not empowered to make decisions, but have to report back to others for consultation. The valid reason for this otherwise absurd practice is that it stops officials making injudicious contracts because they have been bribed.

It is customary for a visitor to North Korea to be entertained to a banquet on his last night before departure. The vultures who beset this unfortunate gentleman lied to him and told him it was the custom for the visitor to treat his hosts to a dinner. He accepted this, and so the vultures were able to enjoy their banquets and share the cost of the meal which the state authorities, unaware that the foreigner had already paid for it, would later pay over to the hotel manager. They also tried to purchase
andrew holloway

more drink and cigarettes on his account after the meal, but he was now wise to what was happening, and when the girl brought him the bill for this, he refused to pay it.

The initial contract the Koreans had drawn up for his consideration for purchasing much-needed equipment from him was unrealistic. Nevertheless, having ventured thus far, he had been considering a return visit for further negotiations. After they screwed two or three hundred dollars out of him on his last night – and tried for more – he knocked that idea on the head. He left the country determined never to return. He had decided to write off the whole bad experience as a sorry waste of time and money. Half a dozen Koreans had eaten well for a couple of weeks and built up a healthy stock of imported booze and cigarettes for themselves, and left the country no further forward. It would be wrong, however, to think of these Koreans as crooks and swindlers. They are more like naughty children. The trouble is that even up to quite a high level – one of the culprits in this case was the director of quite an important state enterprise – the North Koreans are so unsophisticated and so ignorant of the outside world that they simply have no idea of the value of money. They do not have a clue what constitutes a lot of money to a foreigner and what does not. I very much doubt if these people would have been as greedy and irresponsible if they had been capable of gauging the implications of their actions; but they were not.

It is only fair to record that although this sort of behaviour was becoming more and more common and more and more outrageous over the summer of 1988, it was still by no means universal. In the same week that these events were taking place, another overseas businessman was telling me what a pleasure he was finding it to do business in North Korea, where the people were so honest and industrious.
On Saturday 25th June 1988, the thirty-eighth anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, bloodthirsty sermons were preached to a packed congregation by assorted Juche priests and bishops in Kim Il Sung Square. Fortunately I was not there to hear them. I was on my second trip outside Pyongyang, on this occasion to Mount Kumgang.

As usual we left Pyongyang by a night train. There were a party of us, myself, Michael, Holmer, Astrid and Linda, and two interpreters. Originally only Michael and I had been scheduled to go the week before. However, I made remonstrations that the request of Holmer and Astrid, who were due to leave Korea on July 7th, to visit Mount Kumgang was being overlooked. As was usual there, if you made a fuss you got what you wanted. The trip was deferred for a week and then off we all went together.

It had been glorious weather all week in Pyongyang, but when we arrived in the west coast port city of Wonsan on the Friday morning it was pissing down. We took breakfast in the hotel in Wonsan and then set off in two ancient Volvos for the mountain. The journey is only one hundred and twenty kilometres, but the road is in such a bad state of repair that it takes three hours. From time to time we passed gangs of construction workers toiling with their bare hands or the most basic of tools to renovate and widen parts of the road. It was a pretty hopeless, patchwork exercise. Once we were delayed for several minutes until a lorry could be brought to pull a bus that was blocking our path out of the mud where it had got stuck.

In this area, as around Kaesong, the mechanisation of agriculture evidently still had a long way to go. The paddy fields were full of peasants bent over in the rain, weeding. They were wearing thin plastic-hooded coats like the one in the museum that Kim Jong Il gave to the soldier. For ever tractor we saw, we must have seen thirty draft animals. Still the villages and townships we passed through looked clean and well cared for. The children all wore the standard navy blue uniforms and doubtless had
schools in which to wear them. On our way back two days later in the sunshine, I noticed that all the adults out here were as well groomed, and wore the same clothes, as the people in Pyongyang. Everybody smiled and waved as we drove past and were suitably delighted if we took the trouble to wave back. I began to feel a bit like the queen.

If the Koreans are serious about attracting affluent tourists from the West, they ought to do something about the state of that road; like tearing it up and burying it under a new one. They could also do with ensuring a more adequate hot water supply to the hotel at Mount Kumgang. It was barely tepid while we were there. Other people who have stayed there said we were fortunate to find it that warm.

Whether as a reprisal for my insisting that Holmer and Astrid came on the trip, or a routine penny-pinching measure on the part of the publishing house, Michael and I were assigned a shared room. This reaffirmed my conviction that if there ever had been a good time for anyone to be a foreign language reviser in Pyongyang, it was now over. Sami and Simone recalled a time when the Koreans were anxious to take the revisers on trips every few weeks. Now it was necessary to pressure them to get anywhere at all. Yet it is difficult to complain when you know that for a local to go to Mount Kumgang is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was, for example, the first visit our English speaking interpreter had made there, and would quite possibly be his last. Also it has to be said that if you do put pressure on the locals, these delightfully kind people really do prefer to meet your wishes even though they cost money.

The rain poured down incessantly all Friday afternoon. We became despondent. It is by no means uncommon once the rainy season is under way, which can be any time from the end of June, for it to pour for three days consecutively. We need not have worried. Saturday and Sunday were both beautiful days. We spent a day and a half roaming some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever come across, jagged cliffs, cascading waterfalls and emerald pools, and swimming in the still, warm waters of a beautiful lagoon, Lagoon Samil. Even Lagoon Samil has its religious association. There is a red marker buoy to mark the spot where that
indomitable communist woman revolutionary, Mother of Korea and
crack marksperson Comrade Kim Jong Suk, is alleged to have potted a
wild duck with a pistol at two hundred metres.

There were some other people about that weekend: a party of Chinese
tourists, a Hungarian delegation and a group from the East German
Embassy. Sadly, although there were plenty of empty rooms in our hotel
and more vacant accommodation in another, older hotel and a couple of
rest houses nearby, the only Koreans to be seen were guides, interpreters,
drivers and compatriots visiting the homeland from Japan.

According to the *Korean Review*, ‘Mount Kumgang, which has been
developed into a pleasant recreation ground for our people, is visited
by a large number of working people, youth, students and children
for sightseeing and recreation every year’ (p. 248). Unfortunately, this
particular weekend and, I suspect every other weekend in 1988, they
were all too busy building the revolution and construction to come and
enjoy it.

The only disappointment with this trip was that it was far too short. It
used to be that the trip to Mount Kumgang was a five-day tour. But times
are tight these days in North Korea and the foreign language reviser has
become a devalued species. After lunch on the Sunday we had to set off
on the bumpy road back to Wonsan. We did have one further treat in
store for us, though. We broke the journey for an hour or so to sunbathe
and swim in the East Sea of Korea (known to the rest of the world as the
Sea of Japan). This very pleasant beach, situated behind a tea-house for
the use of foreigners and cadres, is one of the few places where there is
a break in the five-foot-high electrical fences that run the length of the
country along both east and west coastlines. It is doubtful if these fences
would hold up an American invasion force for more than five minutes,
or even deter a South Korean spy or saboteur determined to gain entry
to the country. What the electrical fence does do, apart from wasting
valuable electricity, is remind the local population that the war is not yet
over so they had better tighten their belts and put their faith in the Great
Leader if they want to survive it.
It was strange, especially in a place as peaceful as Pyongyang, to have a policeman guarding your residence twenty-four hours a day, to have to say *anyon kosinmiga* to one every time you went in or out. I often used to wonder about them, whether they ever questioned the futility of their occupation and whether it ever bothered them. I used to wonder even more when the good weather came and there would often be all three of them hanging round the entrance to the compound together, one of them on duty, the other two there because they had nothing better to do. Jean-Jacques, who knew them well, assured me that they were quite content. I expect he was right, although I can never quite apprehend how people can adapt to such uneventful and unstimulating lives. For months I used to feel sorry for the interpreters at the Ansan Chodasso, two young men having to share a room and with nothing much to do, but having to be there most of the time in case of some unexpected contingency. Later I came to realise that a stint in residence at the Ansan Chodasso was a much-coveted situation; a break from the inexorable round of hard work, an opportunity to converse with people from different cultures, the regular offers of cigarettes and coffee or a glass of beer.

Like our interpreters, our policemen were usually cheerful. The policemen may have been unproductive. They were not always idle. Like most Koreans, they were both very affectionate towards and very natural with children. They used to like playing with the children who lived in the other two apartment blocks in our compound. They used to help the older ones with their homework. They helped the residents in the garden, planting maize and potatoes and sunflowers. Sometimes I would see one or other of them reading the day’s edition of *Rodong Sinmun*, just like a real person in a real country reading a real newspaper. The worrying thing was that of course they thought they were. As mentioned previously, they did not neglect their studies either, and two out of three of them qualified for university places while guarding us against miscreants.
I do not think I will ever be able to convince myself that the year I spent in Pyongyang was anything other than a mistake. However, it could have been a lot worse. The winter that nearly destroyed me was very mild by Pyongyang standards. When summer came, the hot water supply to our district was not cut off until the 28th June, and only from that date did we have to bathe in cold water. In previous years apparently it had been switched off near the beginning of the month.

It was around that date, just after the outing to Mount Kumgang, that my supply of work virtually came to a standstill. Up until then there had always been the occasional day, about once a month on average, when there would be no texts for me to revise. Now I entered a period when I was more often idle than I was occupied. Apart from the staple fare of the three periodicals, there was absolutely nothing else coming through except for the occasional abysmal essay from the Academy of Juche Sciences. Not only that, but the English translators on the periodicals, steadfast Juche revolutionaries to a man, had been so assiduous and shown so much talent in studying my revisions and improving the standard of their English that the texts that were coming through were taking me less and less time to correct. This was a mixed blessing. Uncongenial as the work had been, it had given me something to do. Pyongyang has little to offer in the way of amusement or recreation to the man with time on his hands.

It would be inconsistent with North Korean philosophy for me to be paid a lot of precious hard currency to sit around doing nothing. Nor was it likely that the translators would be loafing about at their desks at the publishing house in the midst of the two-hundred-day campaign. I could only assume that many of them had been drafted temporarily to help out on the construction sites and that was the reason there were so few translations for me to revise. One thing was for sure. Nobody was about to tell me the reason why, and by this time I had been there long enough not to waste my breath asking.

I had been coming round to thinking that I really ought to be putting
some sort of brake on my alcohol consumption. Now, with so much time on my hands, this was out of the question. As well as the time spent actually drinking, the stupefaction of hangovers was proving at other times the best antidote to boredom.

Another mixed blessing was that for some reason the month of June saw a very marked improvement in the quality of the food at the Ansan Chodasso. It is always pleasant to eat nice food, particularly when life does not have a lot else to offer, but I had already been getting fat as a result of my unaccustomed sedentary existence. By the end of July I weighed nearly a stone and a half more than I had ever weighed in my life before.

To pass the time I took to wandering about aimlessly even more than before. Again I was lucky for, although the monsoon had arrived, it was of modest proportions. My colleagues recalled occasions from previous years when the rain had bucketed down for days at a time. 1988 had its share of heavy rain but there were few days when it was impossible to get out at all. The natural scenery along the Potang River was lovely, and there was usually some ludicrous human activity going on in the vicinity.

If the construction workers on the bridge were short of tools and implements, the students, who had been mobilised at this time to dig up and relay the paths through the Potang River Pleasure Park when they would have been much better employed applying themselves to their studies, were even worse provided for. Every day there would be literally hundreds of them squatting in groups along the river bank doing nothing. There would be a few of them active with picks and spades, and I suppose everyone took a turn during the course of the day, but for the most part most of them just sat and chattered, simply because they had no tools to do the work with. Some of them brought their books with them but these were mainly used to sit on to keep the seats of their pants clean. One day someone did find something that they could all do at once. One of the official national obsessions is that nothing should ever be wasted. Once they had dug up a path, they had to break the tarmac down into powder so that it could be reprocessed. Hence one day I came across about two hundred of them all gathered together in their habitual
squatting position, only this time the sound of childish laughter was replaced by the dull tapping of stone against lumps of tar. I could scarcely believe my eyes. They were literally using lumps of stone to break up the lumps of tarmac. Only one girl was making swift progress in the work. She was the privileged one who had been awarded the solitary hammer.

It would be wrong of me to give the impression that the great socialist construction was uniformly stranded, literally, in the Stone Age. It was around this time that brand-new push-button automatic gates were installed at the entrance to the factory next door. These caused a sensation for the first few days. All day long the people’s guard dolls were inundated with requests from the workers to give a demonstration of this miraculous innovation. They had read in Rodong Sinmun and heard on television and radio about the mythical robotisation and computerisation of Juche industry. Now before their very eyes the myth was being translated into reality, in their own humble factory. One could imagine them as they watched the gates glide open and shut at the press of a button, saying to one another, ‘If only our compatriots in the South could see how advanced we are becoming. Then they would be astonished and rise up as one to oust the puppet clique and drive out the us imperialist aggressor in order to share in our prosperity. But Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo tell lies about us and keep the people in darkness.’

Although the young workers at the factory looked as bright and enthusiastic as ever as they attained the two-thirds stage in the battle after over four months of continual toil, and still had enough energy to spare for their noisy games of soccer and volleyball every lunchtime, not excluding the days when it was teeming down with rain, they are only flesh and blood and they must have been feeling extremely weary at times. I expect it was in an effort to boost morale and raise flagging spirits that my hero, the party secretary, organised the factory brass band to stand at the gates each morning and pipe the workers in with stirring tunes, while a girl, selected for her piercing tones, shrieked out revolutionary slogans in between numbers and a cast of extras stood around shaking plastic flowers. From then on there was hardly any point to me setting
my alarm clock. I imagine it was for the same reason that he had them all up on the top floor of the central building after work each day for hymn singing. Their sweet voices wafting across the yard never failed to lure me out onto my balcony. It was absurd, I told myself, contemptible, a deliberate perversion of the human spirit. Only the moistness in my eyes acknowledged that I was in the presence of something lovely.

Meanwhile the dancing girls with their baskets of plastic flowers and strips of pink chiffon had transferred their theatre of activities to Chollima Street on the square besides the Sports Palace. Their place in our street was taken by troops of students and workers practising the goose step and shouting ‘Manse!’ (pronounced man-say, the Korean version of hooray!). Sami told me they were rehearsing for a march of as many as a million people through Kim Il Sung Square on the morning of September 9th. This would precede the mass games in the afternoon. As if the people did not have enough to contend with already, working twelve hours a day every day, they now had an hour’s marching practice after work several evenings a week. Perhaps the frisson they would experience for those brief moments on the big day when they went through their paces under the benevolent gaze of the father leader himself would make it all worthwhile.

Sami had also heard from his student translators to whom he gave lectures at the publishing house that they had been learning new dances for the soirée that was to be held in Kim Il Sung Square on the evening of September 9th. A couple of days after he mentioned this, we saw a number of the girls from the factory excused labour to pirouette around the yard all afternoon in the charge of a dance instructress.

I was sorry I would be missing all the great spectacles of September 9th, but not sorry enough to put up with a few more weeks of trying to live in that lousy country just for the sake of that.

By this time I was having great difficulty in maintaining a clear distinction in my mind between hating my life in the country and hating the country itself. Apart from having been there for far too long, what was really alienating me was mounting anxiety about my family at home. I had been allowed to receive one letter from them in November and a
postcard in December. Michael had brought a letter back from England with him in January. In March I had received a postcard. Since then, nothing. I was being woken in the night with nightmares about nasty things happening to them. Although I never interpreted my bad dreams as portents of disaster in the real world, they were something I could well have lived without.

A couple of days after the contingent of English and German revisers departed Pyongyang Central Station for Mount Kumgang, the Great Leader President Kim Il Sung set off from the same place with rather more of a fanfare for the People’s Republic of Mongolia on one of his rare state visits. When the news of his intended visit to Mongolia had been first announced on TV, our redoubtable chambermaid Kum Sing, as true-hearted a Juche revolutionary as ever was, had happened to be visiting Sami. On hearing the news, she became quite concerned for him. It was too much, she said. Such a long train journey at his time of life. Already he has done so much for the working people, yet still he will not allow himself to rest and take things easy.

She need not have worried. The old man has nothing if not endurance, and the royal train looked sufficiently well appointed to ease the rigours of the journey. He travelled northwards through Manchuria and then turned left for Ulan Bator. He had cordial and constructive talks with Comrade Jamryn Batmunkh, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party and Chairman of the Presidium of the Great People’s Khural of the Mongolian People’s Republic. They discussed a wide range of issues and reached a full consensus of opinion on all of them. What issues did they discuss and what conclusions did they come to? The media supply no answers to such questions in the DPRK, where the working people are fully-fledged masters of society and state power.

He made his return journey through Soviet territory, stopping off at Khabarossk for talks with Vsevolod Murakhovski, First Vice Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, and other senior officials. It was not disclosed what they talked about either, but for the next few weeks after the president’s return home on July 6th, footage of his journey clogged
all TV channels. For the first few days after his return the film of his visit was shown every night. On Sunday, 10th July, it was broadcast at eleven in the morning, three in the afternoon and seven in the evening – and, for all I know, it may have been shown again after the nine o’clock news.

We viewers were treated to lots of shots of him strolling along red carpets with his curious rolling, splay-footed gait, while hordes of Mongolian citizens went into well-rehearsed hysteria. We saw him bestowing kisses on bouquet-bearing children, attending banquets, and hosting conferences of distinguished visitors aboard the royal train. And was it the cunning focusing of the Korean cameraman or just that enormous and undeniable personal presence that enabled him to dominate every scene and reinforce the image that the North Korean public has of him as the spiritual emperor of the times to whom all the progressive people of the world pay spontaneous homage?

Meanwhile his less photogenic progeny was out in the sticks, keeping up the dynastic tradition of on-the-spot guidance in North Pyongan and North Hamgyong Provinces. His activities were extensively reported verbally on the television and in the newspapers, but his image was modestly withheld from public scrutiny.
Earlier in the summer Jean-Jacques had bought a car, a twelve-year-old Toyota Crown, for two thousand dollars from an Algerian diplomat. One gorgeous Saturday afternoon when the sun was blazing down but the humidity levels were relatively low after a deluge the night before, we took a drive out to the DPRK’s much-vaunted new golf course. It turned out to be a well-maintained and interesting course, set amid some very appealing scenery. It contained several challenging dog-legs to be negotiated as it wound its way round the shores of a reservoir. I would have loved to play a round on it, but at seventy-five dollars a time it was way beyond my means. If they had charged something more reasonable, it might have been well-patronised by the foreign residents. As it was, the prohibitive cost made it the exclusive preserve of a handful of visiting businessmen from Japan and the Egyptian ambassador, a man of independent wealth as well as a career diplomat. Jean-Jacques and I had to content ourselves with a swim in the tepid waters of the lake.

The North Korean countryside is always an edifying spectacle. Everything is so neat and orderly. The grass verges on the roadside are always well trimmed. The cottages are well cared for too. However, all that could be seen of them on this day was the roofs.

There are two types of collective farm in operation in the DPRK. There are those that still operate on the co-operative system of profit sharing. Then there are those on which the state pays each peasant a fixed wage, like an industrial worker. For ideological reasons the government wants the latter model to eventually become uniform throughout the country, so these types of farm are better supplied with fertiliser and machinery to give them the ascendancy. On either type of farm the individual peasant family is allotted a small patch of garden around their house to cultivate for their private benefit. They can sell the produce from their garden at markets that are held in discreet places in the urban areas.

Thus it was that there was scarcely a cottage to be seen for the stalks of maize taller than a man’s head that thronged every garden.
On Thursday, 14th July, I took the evening train to North Korea’s premier tourist resort, Mount Myohant. It was less than three weeks since I had returned from my last trip to Mount Kumgang, but I was not complaining. My capacity for coping with Korea was exhausted and I was in need of another break.

This time my own companions were two Koreans. One was An Yan Mok, who had replaced Mr Min as head of protocol. Mr Min had disappeared from view some months previously. This was a source of some sadness to Sami and Simone. They had known him for several years and entertained a lot of affection for him. They were saddened not only by the fact of his departure but at the manner of it. He simply disappeared from view. It had not even been possible for him to call at the Ansan Chodasso and say a brief personal farewell. It is highly unlikely that there was anything sinister about his disappearance. He may well have been promoted. It was just typical of the extent to which foreigners are denied knowledge of the most mundane of Korean affairs, and how Koreans are discouraged from developing relations with foreigners that extend beyond the requirements of courtesy and protocol.

Direct communication between myself and An Yon Mok was somewhat limited as his foreign language was Spanish. However, my other companion, Chang Yang, who had taken U No’s place as resident interpreter at the Ansan Chodasso in May, did sterling work interpreting between English and Korean. Chang Yong had come to work as a translator the hard way. On leaving school he was not recommended for a university place by his teachers. Undeterred, he had in exemplary fashion studied English for three years in his spare time while employed as a labourer on construction sites before being taken on as a trainee at the publishing house.

Mount Myohant vies with Mount Kumgang as the North’s outstanding area of natural beauty, and boasts the added attraction of the International Friendship Exhibition. Therefore it has the most developed facilities for tourism. The road surfaces are smooth and there are at
least four hotels, including one reserved for Koreans from Japan and one for senior cadres. For foreigners there is the country’s other hotel, apart from the Koryo, of international standard, the pyramid-shaped Hyangsan Hotel, and a small hotel further up the valley, where we stayed. The Korean translators always prefer to stay at this little two-story hotel of no more than a dozen rooms, I think because they find it less impersonal and less daunting than the Hyangsan. The hotel epitomised all that is best and worst about North Korea. The staff were all charming and friendly, while the manager in his dealings with them displayed a suitable popular work style and method. But when I wanted to buy a drink it took a quarter of an hour to find a girl to serve me, and it was forty-eight hours later before she could give me my change because they had run out of red won. In my bathroom a rim of black mould was settling above the bath, the stopper in the sink no longer functioned, and when I pulled my towel from the plastic towel rail, the rail snapped in half because it was not properly secured to the wall. One of the two screws that held it in place had fallen out, and no-one had bothered to replace it. Personally I did not mind these inconveniences, although I might have felt differently if I had been paying the bill and not the publishing house. What did make me very angry was when we came back from the Hyongsang Hotel, to which we adjourned in the evening because our hotel did not run to a proper bar, only to find ourselves locked out at ten past midnight. While I ranted on about how the manager seemed to think he was running a Children’s Union camp, not a hotel, my Korean friends, who did not seem to see anything particularly untoward in our situation, scrabbled out in the dark, trying to find some means of access. It was fully fifteen minutes before they succeeded in locating a lighted room at the rear of the building where a few of the staff were playing cards. By the time they appeared at the front door to let me in, my patience had snapped. I was trying to draw attention to my presence outside the locked door – and venting my frustration in the process – by singing raucously at the top of my voice, as a result of which I received some evil looks from the half-dozen other guests at breakfast the following morning.

For all its luxurious fittings, the Hyangsan was hardly more efficient.
The first night we arrived there were a few guests having a drink at the little bar in the lobby. For some reason the management of the hotel did not want us to drink there. They offered instead to open up another bar on the first floor for our convenience. At first I refused to accept this arrangement because I suspected that we were being classed as too low-caste, coming from the little hotel up the road, to rub shoulders with guests of the Hyangsan. I changed my mind when I discovered that the only cold beer on offer in the lobby bar was the Korean Ryongsong brand. So within no more than thirty minutes of our arrival they had opened an upstairs bar, found a girl to serve us, and we finally had a drink in our hands. In the end it was quite a pleasant evening. We were served by a sweet girl of twenty-one who told us that her ambition was to get married, have five children, and bring them all up as fine Juche revolutionaries. When we left, she asked us to come back the next night, which we did. On this occasion there was nobody using the ground floor bar so they told us we would have to use that one, as the first floor bar had that very day been closed for renovations. Then we had to wait a quarter of an hour while the girl went upstairs to fetch down some chilled cans of imported Japanese lager for me to drink.

The International Friendship Museum is an extraordinary phenomenon. It has been established protocol for many years that any official visitor to North Korea presents the Great Leader, and latterly the Dear Leader as well, with a gift as a token of esteem and friendship. According to the Korean Review, the president has now received over 28,000 valuable gifts from ‘heads of state, parties, governments, revolutionary organisations and people from all walks of life in 146 countries’. Some years ago the International Friendship Exhibition was built on Mount Myohyant as a museum for all these gifts. Putting the gifts on display for the public was intended to serve a twofold purpose: first of all, to reinforce in the minds of the people the concept of their country as a marvellous success story, and more especially a success story made possible only through the incomparable leadership of president Kim Il Sung, whom the rest of the world regards with reverence and looks to for guidance. In the words of the Review (p. 213), it ‘reflects the profound
respect and reverence held by the revolutionary peoples of the world for the Great Leader President Kim Il Sung’. The second purpose was educational: to let the people see interesting and beautiful things and learn a little about the art and culture of other countries.

The second purpose has in practice been overlooked. Visitors are herded through the sixty rooms – plus the annexe containing the donations to the Dear Leader – as if they were on a conveyor belt. They only have time for a passing glance at the gifts on display. The lights in each room are on a time switch so anyone who lingers too long is plunged into darkness. Visitors are not expected to examine the gifts, only to marvel at such irrefutable evidence of the Great Leader’s global popularity. This is a great pity because there, jumbled among Rolex watches, tape recorders and other mundane bric-a-brac, are many beautiful and valuable antiques and art objects. Some Asian and African countries have been particularly generous. I made rather a nuisance of myself by insisting on having a good look at some of the items. The staff reacted to my eccentricity with good humour and tolerance. If the lights went out before I had finished looking, they turned them back on again for me.

Needless to say, individuals are not free to wander into the Exhibition unescorted and take a look round whenever they feel like it and happen to be in the vicinity. They are taken round by prior arrangement in large parties. It is one thing for a single Englishman, accompanied by two interpreters, to hold up the conveyor belt because he actually wants to examine the objects on display. This would not be feasible for an individual Korean who was part of a group of thirty.

Mount Myohyant, like Mount Kumgang, was as beautiful as the feature writers for Korea Today said it was, a rare instance when North Korean self-publicity corresponded to reality. Another nice thing I saw on Mount Myohyant was that there were actually some Korean people in evidence, out enjoying themselves, who were not escorting foreigners. We were otherwise lucky with the weather but on the afternoon of our second day
there was heavy rain. Yon Mok and Chang Yong decided that weather conditions were too inhospitable for sightseeing. They settled for staying in the hotel playing pool, a game which Koreans love but which they only get to play when they have access to the haunts for foreigners. I borrowed an umbrella from the hotel and set off alone to follow the path we had taken the day before through the Manpok Ravine. I told my friends later that their trouble was they had earned their trip to the mountain too easily simply by virtue of knowing foreign languages. For that afternoon the Manpok Ravine was thronged with Koreans. I guessed that many of them were staying at a lodge which Holmer and Astrid had told me about, which consisted of a kitchen and two bare rooms in which a hundred people at a time squeezed together to sleep on the floor. These were people who had probably won their once-in-a-lifetime trip to legendary Mount Myohyant by overfulfilling their quotas for the two-hundred-day campaign in less than a hundred and fifty. For some of them it would be the first time they had ever had the chance to leave their native places. They were not going to squander their golden opportunity sheltering from the monsoon. If anything the torrential rain had enhanced their festive mood. While the older generation picnicked and sang songs under the shelter of overhanging rocks, the young people took the attitude that if they were going to get soaked, they might as well do it properly. I saw people waving and splashing in the mountain pools and taking showers under cascading waterfalls. It was one big party in the monsoon and the mountain. The hilarious arrival of an umbrella-bearing, pot-bellied white man with short fat hairy legs protruding from cut-off denim shorts, an absolute outrage against North Korean standards of modesty, was all they needed to make their day complete.

Earlier that day on another stretch of the mountain, Chang Yong and I had come across a vestige of the old world. We came upon a little temple that contained a beautiful bronze statue of Shakyamuni. In the temple’s other rooms lived an old man who looked after it. He showed us in and even performed a little chant for us. He did not know his exact age but said he was over sixty. He told us he lived alone in the temple and devoted himself to prayer and meditation. I asked him how many years
he had lived there. He did not know, but said the Japanese were still occupying the country when he started living there. He was not a monk. He was dressed like an ordinary Korean worker. He accepted the offer of a cigarette. People still came to worship, he informed us, mainly old people but some young ones. He was a memorable man, our hermit of Mount Myohyant. If he had not yet attained nirvana, he had an aura that suggested he was well on the way. If I had thought at the time, I should have asked him if the local party secretary had been round to tell him to put in a few extra hours of prayer as his contribution to the two-hundred-day campaign.

We found further evidence that Buddhism is not yet extinct in the DPRK the following morning when we visited the Pokyon Temple. The Pokyon Temple was an important centre of worship for many centuries. If our little hermitage of the day before was like a bijou country church, the Pokyon Temple was a cathedral. It was a partly mined cathedral, as several of its buildings had not survived the war. However, being a Far-Eastern centre of worship, it consisted of a number of small buildings instead of a single edifice like our cathedrals in the West. The buildings that remains were well worth seeing and contained some memorable statues. They also contained a community of seven Buddhist monks. Those monks are a recent innovation. Although as far as I can ascertain, the communist government has never actively repressed religion, it has actively discouraged it. The reintroduction of monks to the Pokyon Temple would seem to indicate a desire on the part of the government to encourage a vestigial Buddhism in order to preserve the country’s cultural heritage now that the authorities feel secure in the belief that Buddhism no longer poses a serious threat to Juche as the creed of the working masses.

Another guest at the small hotel on Mount Myohyant while I was there was a young lecturer from the Sorbonne. He had been invited by the DPRK government to spend three months at the Academy of Juche Sciences instructing the people there in the philosophies of other countries.
I had always been intrigued by the Academy of Juche Sciences. Located on a campus about thirty kilometres from Pyongyang, it was a community of intellectuals composed of the cream of North Korea’s non-scientific academics. The only member I ever met was a young man who was interpreting for a delegation from the Korea-Denmark Friendship Society. I was very impressed by his flawless command of English. Yet the articles in English translation on economics, politics and philosophy emanating from the Academy that came my way to revise were quite appalling. I am not exaggerating when I say that an English undergraduate turning out such drivel would not have survived a university course. Why were people who must have been possessed of considerable intelligence incapable of mounting a logical and coherent argument?

The young Frenchman explained that even at this elite centre of learning there was a pitiful dearth of foreign literature available to supplement the national intellectual diet of speeches by the president and his son, supplemented by inane propaganda. Of the foreign literature that was available at the Academy, little had been translated and published in Korean. The academicians were therefore obliged to wrestle with a limited quantity of literature in the original foreign language. They are not only starved of good literature to stimulate their minds; their cognitive abilities are further stultified by another factor. It is not permissible for them to address any issue in a spirit of honest and open enquiry. Instead, a specific mission has been ordained for them by the Dear Leader. They are to write: ‘books and articles which give profound explanations of the Juche thought and theory […] and strengthen the struggle against reactionary bourgeois ideals and all kinds of opportunist ideological trends and staunchly defend the purity of the Juche idea’. (*On the Juche Idea*, p. 84)

They are to ‘make the great Juche Idea their firm belief and should ensure that all scientific and theoretical activities are geared to studying and propagating, defending and materialising the Juche thought and theory; they should also explain and disseminate the greatness and validity of the Juche Idea broadly and profoundly’ (*On the Juche Idea*,
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p. 85). It can be safely assumed that failure to do so will result in instant ejection from the comforts and privileges of the ivory tower to join the ranks of the sweaty labourers in the two-hundred-day campaign.

The Frenchman also informed me that the groves of Juche Academia were not immune to the plague of corruption that was sweeping Pyongyang in the summer of ’88. Things were so bad there that, although he had a car and a driver at his permanent disposal, he seldom ventured into the city because such excursions were proving too expensive by the time he had had to ply his driver and interpreters with cigarettes, meals and refreshments. He told me that his driver would just pull up outside a hotel unbidden, and then the interpreters would say to him, ‘Now you will buy us all a meal.’

Psi

On Mount Myohyant I relaxed in between excursions with a fortnight-old copy of the International Herald Tribune which I had borrowed from Jean-Jacques. On the front page of the Singapore edition for July 2nd–3rd was an article headlined ‘A Shift in Policy for Seoul’.

‘President Roh Tae Woo, enunciating a major shift in policy, said Friday that South Korea would no longer seek to isolate the communist North but would ask the United States and other allies to help integrate North Korea into the international community.’ It seemed that Roh Tae Woo had now decided that given South Korea’s incomparably greater economic prosperity, the general easing of East–West confrontation on the international scene, and a rising tide of anti-American, pro-reunification sentiment at home, the time had come for rapprochement on the Korean peninsula. The same article quoted the chairman of the Daewoo Corporation expressing willingness to set a precedent by being the first South Korean company to build a factory in the North.

I had seen no mention of a radical shift in South Korean policy in the Pyongyang Times. I asked my Korean friends if they had heard anything about it. They had not, and so did not believe the Herald Tribune’s story.

They did know that there had been a recent proposal from Roh Tae
Woo to hold top level North–South talks which their government had turned down. They explained to me that it would be a betrayal of the heroic struggle of the South Korean people to oust the tyrant Roh Tae Woo, if the North were to enter into negotiations with him.
My final weeks in Pyongyang’s timeless grip slipped by sluggishly. I remained semi-employed. Most weeks I only received enough texts from the publishing house to occupy me for two or three days. I went for walks, read books and drank heavily in the evenings. I was fortunate with the weather. It was a hotter summer than usual with temperatures consistently well into the eighties and few days of heavy rain.

Around me the two-hundred-day campaign drew towards its close. In the early evenings there were more and more people out on the streets practising marching for an hour after work, this on top of their already protracted working day, in preparation for September 9th.

I was allowed to have one more weekend excursion before I left Korea. Sami had often told me how much he liked the northern industrial city of Hamhung and mentioned that a trip there always incorporated a day on the beach as well as guided tours of major factories such as the Ryongsang Heavy Machine Factory and the February 8th Vindon Complex. I couched my request to go to Hamhung in terms of desire to see something of North Korea’s brilliant heavy industry in action and, although I had already had more excursions than any other reviser that summer, I was able to go to Hamhung as well.

For some strange reason, once I got to Hamhung, the only factory I was taken to see was the Ryongsong Heavy Machine Factory. I can only speculate that the North Koreans have recently woken up to the fact that their industry is now lagging behind the rest of the world, and they have come to realise that taking foreigners to see their industrial installations is likely to give them an adverse rather than a positive impression of the country. Certainly the Ryongsong heavy Machine Factory, which is one of the country’s most important industrial bases, presented a sad spectacle of well-maintained plant and machinery which would no doubt have been quite impressive for a third-world country twenty years ago, but is now obsolete. The official who showed us round admitted as such. All the machines, he said, had been built in the sixties and seventies.
However, he assured us, in three years’ time they would be using these machines to make new machines which would take their place.

As very little had been arranged for me on this trip, I spent quite a lot of time randomly wandering the streets. As in Pyongyang, and I imagine every other town and city in North Korea, the town was built to a pattern of modern apartment blocks fronting the main thoroughfares and concealing warrens of traditional cottages behind. There was far less traffic on the roads than in Pyongyang, but more than in Kaesong. As one would expect of a centre of heavy industry, Hamhung was a greyer, shabbier place than Pyongyang, but for me the most striking difference between the two cities was that here the people did not stare at me nearly as much, not even when I was roaming among the traditional cottages, although Europeans were obviously a far rarer phenomenon here than in Pyongyang. I was particularly grateful for this aspect of the people of the Hamhung area on the Sunday, when we went to the beach twenty kilometres away. This was not a beach reserved for high officials and pampered foreigners. It was a place of recreation for thousands of Korean families on a day’s furlough from the two-hundred-day campaign, and I was the only white man on it. It had a lovely day sunbathing and swimming, which could easily have been marred if the people had stared at me as if I had just escaped from a zoo.

The Saturday evening was interesting. Instead of staying in the hotel, I bought cans of beer and went off with my interpreters to the local park. In their society which offers so few pleasures, one thing that Koreans love to do is to sit out under the stars on summer evenings. We climbed up to a pretty wooden pavilion, overlooking the city, and sat among the local people gossiping in the balmy night air, attracting I dare say a little envy at our cans of Japanese beer. On our way up we passed the city’s principal statue of the Great Leader. The bronze statue was illuminated by floodlights. A number of young devotees were gathered around the statue and studying the thoughts of the prophet by the beam of the floodlights in the presence of his brazen image. This is indubitably extremely silly, but when you are actually there it is also rather touching. I found it so anyway. ‘Do people in your country stand
under statues of Margaret Thatcher and study her works?’ asked Chang Yong ingenuously.

✶

I was promised that before I left I would be taken to visit a number of places of interest around Pyongyang. I asked to visit a school, a kindergarten, a factory, and to see one of the rehearsals for the mass games. None of these outings was ever arranged but I did get to see the Pyongyang Maternity Hospital and the Students’ and Children’s Palace.

The Pyongyang Maternity Hospital is the jewel in the crown of North Korea’s national health service. Its importance is attested to by the number of plaques commemorating occasions when the führer or his heir have been round to deliver on-the-spot guidance. Needless to say, I was not taken to the actual wards where the patients were. What they wanted me to see was the jewel-inlaid mosaic floor in the entrance hall and the hi-tech hardware that they had there. I was shown the closed-circuit TV system on which visiting husbands could see and talk to their wives. I said it was very impressive but would it not be easier for the husband just to go upstairs and visit his wife and new-born infant on the ward? Oh no, that would be unhygienic. I asked if fathers could be present at their children’s birth. The doctor who was showing me round was aware that this is now common practice in the West. He replied that such an idea was so alien to his culture that although it would be permissible, no father had ever yet made such a request.

I was then escorted round the theatres and laboratories which contained some sophisticated-looking obstetric hardware, much of it bearing the imprint of Siemens of West Germany. A very embarrassed pregnant lady was obliged to expose herself to me to demonstrate an electronic scanner which the doctor said could determine the sex of an unborn infant and show if the foetus was imperfect in any way. I asked what happened if the scanner did detect a deformed infant. Then, the doctor told me quite blithely, the pregnancy would be terminated. I inferred from the tone of his response that the mother was given no choice in the matter.
When I inquired about the incidence of post-natal depression, the doctor replied that he had never seen an instance of this condition. Naturally I was somewhat sceptical about this statement until I was shown a ward full of babies without a mother in sight. He explained that some women preferred to rest after giving birth and to leave the care of their infants to the nurses. Presumably if they still do not feel able or willing to look after their offspring when they leave the hospital, they can pass on the responsibility within the extended family. It can be assumed then that, unless there is a fully-fledged puerperal psychosis, depressed mothers are perceived merely as tired rather than ill, and do not feel the full consequences of their condition because they can evade the pressures of actually having to try and care for the child.

Pyongyang’s Students’ and Children’s Palace is a huge building in which students and children can pursue a wide range of worthwhile hobbies, from music, dance and drama to physics and electronics, under expert supervision. From what I saw the standards of achievement attained by the children in the various fields were very high. There are similar, smaller establishments in all the DPRK’s main centres of population.

I would have been much more impressed than I was if Chang Yong had not in his naïvety told me that the Students’ and Children’s palaces were the exclusive preserve of the honours students and that, as a lazy, underachieving schoolboy, he had been envious of the youngsters who had access to these facilities. He also told me that for the same reason he never went as a child to the Children’s Camp on Mount Myohyant. It had never occurred to him that such discrimination might be regarded as other than entirely fair and reasonable. Consequently he was astonished when I told him about a text that I had revised in which the president criticised such practices and maintained that all the children of the capital should be given the opportunity to go to Mount Myohyant, so that all should feel that the Party’s love was extended equally to everyone.
I believe it was as early as April when Comrade An Yon Mok came to see me and asked me when I would be leaving. In August, I told him. On which date? he asked. Did I have to stipulate a precise date so soon? Oh yes, he replied, everything must be booked well in advance. I asked if it would be possible for me to travel back as far as Moscow by train. The train journey from Pyongyang to Moscow takes a week. One travels more or less due north through Manchuria to join the Trans-Siberian for the long haul across Soviet Asia. It is said to be a tiring journey through much barren and monotonous scenery, but at least I thought it would be an experience, and I wanted to salvage as many memorable experiences as I could from my year in Pyongyang.

From then on I assumed that it was all settled, and in late summer I would be making an epic overland journey through the mysterious hinterland of China and the Soviet Union. I was looking forward to it immensely. Once again I was to be reminded that nothing in North Korea should ever be taken for granted. It was less than a month before I was due to depart when An Yon Mok came to see me again and announced without any explanation that it would not be possible for me to go by train after all. When would I like to fly to Moscow? I gave him a date and an alternative date in case the flight was fully booked, and he said he would arrange it. Two weeks later he came back and told me that it was not possible for me to fly on either of those dates. I would now be leaving the following Monday. By then I was past caring. All I wanted was to get away.

I arranged to pay a visit to the bank with Chang Yong. For some months the publishing house had been paying a large part of our salaries in small denomination notes of twenty, ten, five and even single dollars. I took in a fat wad of these notes to the value of $2,300 dollars and asked for twenty-three $100 notes in exchange. The clerk told me this could not be done. She said they did not have any $100 notes in the bank. I pointed out to her through Chang Yong that this was the International Trade Bank of
the DPRK, one of the key financial institutions in a country of 20 million inhabitants, and it was inconceivable that there were not twenty-three $100 bills in the whole building. I knew that foreign exchange shortages were a perennial problem in North Korea. Work had had to be briefly suspended on the cement factory on more than one occasion because they had run out of foreign exchange with which to pay the West German company. The same was happening with the hotel that was being built as a joint venture with a French company. But I refused to accept that things were this bad. After about half an hour of argument, the clerk agreed to go and consult the manager. Before she did she asked Chang Yong what my position was in Pyongyang. In view of this question, I would imagine that if I had been an ambassador or an important visiting businessman, twenty-three $100 bills might have been forthcoming. As it was, she came back with a compromise offer: she would exchange $1,300 worth of my small denomination notes for twenty-six $50 notes. When I demanded to speak to the manager personally, I was told that he had ‘just gone out in a car’. At this point I gave up. It was just another typical little tribulation of life in Pyongyang.

The evening before my departure I was given the customary farewell banquet at the Ansan Chodasso. One of the Deputy Directors from the publishing house presided. He asked me if I would be able to find someone to replace me when I got back to England. I was able to inform him that at that very moment a likely candidate was actually present in his country.

On my visit to the Student’s and Children’s palace a few days earlier, I had made the acquaintance of the secretary of the Korea-England Friendship Society who was on a visit to the country and staying as a guest at the Academy of Juche Sciences. When I told him what I was doing, he said he would love to have the opportunity to work in Pyongyang as a reviser. He was an educated man, a librarian by profession, and would have almost certainly been eminently suited for the job. I relayed this information to the Deputy Director and told him that he was not due to leave Korea for another four days. One might have expected the Deputy Director’s response to be that he would
contact him by telephone at the Academy the very next day to arrange
an immediate interview. However, normal reactions are not the norm in
North Korea. To take such an initiative there would be to fly in the face of
bureaucratic procedures that run on such rigid tramlines through every
aspect of the society that it never occurs to anybody, not even a man of
the standing and undoubted intelligence of this Deputy Director, to try
and circumvent them. He responded to my information with pleasure
and urged me to try and get in contact with this man when I got home.

At the airport the following afternoon I embraced Chang Yong and
An Yon Mok with genuine affection. I soon felt rather less well-disposed
towards them when I discovered that the flight they had booked me on
was a small Korean Airways passenger plane of comparable size to the
ones that are chartered to convey package tourists to Europe. My flight
from Moscow to Pyongyang on an Aeroflot Jumbo a year earlier had
taken eight hours. My return flight took twelve. There were two stops
for refuelling, at Beijing and at Novosibirsk. At Novosibirsk we were not
permitted to leave the plane so we could not stretch our legs properly.
It was a damnably uncomfortable and wearisome journey. By the time
I had passed through customs, including a tedious delay while all my
small denomination bills were laboriously counted out, I was feeling
pretty ragged. My mood was not improved on finding that there was
no-one from the Korean Embassy waiting to greet me and escort me
to the embassy as I had been promised. Fortunately Comrade Li Jong
Bin, Third Secretary at the Embassy and an English speaker, was there
although he was not expecting me. He had come to meet a contingent
of Korean students who had been sent to Moscow to master Russian
and a party of assorted foreigners who had been on a study visit at the
Juche Academy. I sought him out and explained who I was and he readily
accepted that I was his responsibility. He packed me with the others onto
a congested coach with our luggage clogging the aisle.

The rations on the plane had been shamefully frugal and I was looking
forward to getting something to eat and drink on our arrival at the
Embassy. We were not provided with so much as a cup of tea, and
were assured that there was nowhere nearby where we could purchase
refreshment at what was by then quite late in the evening. Worse still, there was barely sufficient accommodation for all the foreigners. An Indian man and woman, who were neither married nor in any way related to each other, were obliged to share a room for the night. I had to share with a Tunisian university student who, fortunately turned out to be a thoroughly amiable and easy-going companion. He had only been in Korea for a couple of weeks but he was nearly as relieved to get out as I was. But then he had been a victim of the scrounging and harassment that I had somehow avoided.

Li Jong Bin said he could arrange for me to fly on to London in the morning, and wanted me to do so. I refused. I had been promised a few days in Moscow as a guest of the Korean government, and I was determined not to be denied my opportunity to see this famous city.

The North Korea Embassy is one of the largest in Moscow, a testimony less to the importance of its relations with Russia – after all, the DPRK is not and never has been a Soviet client state – but to Kim Il Sung’s inflated expectations of the importance his country and his own Juche philosophy would assume in the communist world. Like its brilliant heavy industry, North Korea’s Moscow embassy is in a state of premature decay. The wing where foreign guests are accommodated is no more than twenty years old, but the carpets and furniture exude that characteristic musty scent of cheap hotels, the televisions in most of the rooms have broken down, and cockroaches have taken up residence in the bathrooms. However, the hospitality of the Korean domestic staff who, after my inauspicious arrival, could not do enough to make me feel at home, more than made up for the deficiencies in the accommodation.

My overriding impressions of Moscow were of its beauty and of the queues in the shops. The heart of Moscow remains unscarred by the depredations of speculators and property developers, intent on profit and careless of the architectural heritage. Prince Charles would be impressed.

Having said what a lovely unspoiled city it is, it is not a city I which I would like to live. Muscovites seem to spend half their lives standing in queues. They have to queue up to buy quite basic foodstuffs and
I saw long queues for very mundane articles of clothing. Outside all the restaurants there were people queuing for tables. I am told that the people of Moscow are relatively lucky. They have to queue up to buy. Elsewhere in the country, there are no things to buy.
At the time of writing it is four months since I returned from Pyongyang. I entertain no nostalgia for North Korea whatsoever. I spent a difficult year there and I have no desire to return. Although I liked the people very much, the nature of the society prevented me from forming really close relationships with any of them. There were a few with whom I became as friendly as was possible under the circumstances. However, even if I did return, it is not certain that we would be able to meet at all.

It was not the type of society of which I would ever wish to be a member. That is not to say that I do not hold some feelings of respect towards the society or some regrets that it has fallen into what is probably an irreversible decline. I am inclined to believe that Kim Il Sung was a genuine idealist who set out to create a new society that was fundamentally fair, decent and humane. Up to a point he has been successful. After all, North Korea is a third-world Asian country that was decimated only thirty-five years ago. Things could have been a lot worse for the people, who have been living simple but peaceful and secure lives devoid of undue hardship. The social values that Kim Il Sung wished to promote have been instilled in the consciousness of the people who, it cannot be said too often, are as sweet and good-natured and comradely a species of humanity as one could ever wish to encounter. Everywhere I sensed a commitment to the collectivist ideal, even among those who felt frustrated and disenchanted at their country’s failure to sustain economic progress over the last fifteen years. There are no reasons to think that high standards of civic morality are notably indigenous to North Korean culture. In an address to the central committee on 15th December, 1952, when the war was at its height, we find Kim Il Sung complaining that ‘the Ministry of Public health does not take good care of the medicines imported or received as relief from foreign countries. As a result they are spoiled in the ministry’s drug warehouse while local hospitals go short. That is not all. Medicines worth tens of millions of won are stolen from the warehouse.’ (cw, Vol. 7, pp. 341–342)
It is understandable that Kim Il Sung, confronted by this sort of selfishness, incompetence and corruption, plus an internal power struggle, tackled the daunting task of post-war reconstruction in the aftermath of the Americans’ scorched earth bombing campaign with a policy of rigid and centralised physical and psychological control over the people. His policy may be justified by the fact that the country did recover quickly during the fifties and sixties. The current official Chinese view of the similar approach adopted by Chairman Mao after the Chinese revolution is that it was correct for the time, but became counter-productive when persevered with after the problems of primary deprivation and political instability had been largely resolved. The prominent Chinese economist Huan Xiang argues that ‘the eventual consequences of overcentralisation are: the more centralised, the more rigid; the more rigid the economy, the lazier the people; the lazier the people, the poorer they are; and the poorer the people are, the greater the need for centralisation, forming a vicious circle.’ (From his essay Urban Economic Restructure, included in the Chinese government publication Progress in Urban Reform, p. 9)

The reluctance of the Kim regime to follow the post-Mao Chinese example and liberalise can be attributed to a genuine desire to maintain ideological purity and a commitment to preserving the traditional Korean way of life and protecting it from the corrupting influence of the decadent Western way of life, a frequent target of Kim Il Sung polemic. Moreover, just as a Time magazine correspondent could argue that ‘the us must proceed more cautiously [towards democratisation] in South Korea’ because ‘there a more open government is also needed, including freer political activity and direct presidential elections, but the menacing proximity of the frantically Stalinist regime in North Korea makes liberalisation a much more difficult and dangerous proposition’ (Time magazine, 12/5/1981) – so until recently an apologist for Kim Il Sung could similarly maintain that liberalisation in North Korea is made hazardous by the menacing proximity of a us imperialist-backed puppet regime in Seoul.

Unwillingness to liberalise his country’s economy, i.e., liberalisation entails less central control, more individual freedom and more exposure
to outside influences, all of which could serve to undermine his personal authority. Ironically the threat that liberalisation poses to the Kim dynasty becomes greater the longer liberalisation is postponed, because without reform the economy will continue to stagnate, the people’s quality of life will continue to deteriorate, their living standards will fall further and further behind those of the South Koreans, and their ideological commitment to Juche values will become more brittle. Necessity has scarcely forced the North Korean door open a couple of inches in recent times, and already standards of personal conduct have tumbled among those privileged enough to feel the draught. Without foreign investment and technical expertise, the people must toil in two-hundred-day campaigns merely to maintain their current frugal living standards; the news from Pyongyang since my return is that a mere three weeks after the end of the two-hundred-day campaign, on September 9th, the government in desperation gave the order for the people to embark on – you guessed it – another two-hundred-day campaign. But how is the people’s faith in Kim Il Sung and the Juche Idea to withstand the inevitable realisation that must come, if ever wind of the wide world outside is allowed to blow north of the 38th parallel, that the picture of the world with which they have been presented is an illusion, a joke?

This is a harsh dilemma for the Great Leader and his heir. It is one of the great advantages of the parliamentary-style democracies that loss of power for the elected rulers need not be synonymous with personal calamity. All that happens to elected rulers when they are voted out of office is that they go into opposition. For Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, the likely alternatives to power are exile or execution. The fact is that the Kim dynasty is trapped. They may well wish their people to lead better lives, but they dare not take the necessary measures. Yet they cannot go on indefinitely driving the people like slaves. Even the staunchest Juche revolutionaries are only flesh and blood. They become exhausted. They will become disillusioned. The Juche era is doomed. The only question is, will it end with a bang or a whimper?

Nevertheless, the Juche era has not been an altogether unsatisfactory
period in the lives of the North Korean people. Even now the rural population, the majority, enjoy a quality of life that compares favourably with that of peasants in other Asian countries, indeed compares very favourably with that of the army of homeless and dispossessed people in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain. I can imagine a future scenario when the thriving South has reassimilated the stumbling North, and the people of the North are enjoying higher material standards than ever before, in which many of them will look back with nostalgia to the old certainties, the security and the solidarity, that pertained in the reign of the Great Leader.

An objective perspective on the achievements of the Juche era can be derived from the November 1987 edition of South Magazine, which featured a strategic survey on all the countries of the southern hemisphere that charted for each country the population projection for 1990, gross national product expressed in US dollars for 1985, the size of the regular armed forces in 1986, and a score on a Physical Quality of Life Index. The magazine described its Physical Quality of Life Index as ‘an innovative concept developed by M. D. Morris at Brown University. The PQLI consolidates three indicators: life expectancy, infant mortality, and literacy to measure a country’s achievements of basic human requirements on a scale of 1 to 100 – excluding monetary variables.’ The statistics from which the index was compiled were derived from the Overseas Development Council’s 1988 Agenda. This is how South Korea, North Korea and Malaysia, generally regarded as a fairly stable and prosperous developing capitalist country on Asia’s Pacific rim, measured up:

<table>
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<th>N Korea</th>
<th>S Korea</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pop. projection for 1990</td>
<td>22.8m</td>
<td>43.5m</td>
<td>17.4m</td>
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<tr>
<td>GNP in US$ 1985</td>
<td>19,700m</td>
<td>83,123m</td>
<td>28,955m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Armed Forces 1986</td>
<td>840,000</td>
<td>601,000</td>
<td>110,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQLI</td>
<td>85.06</td>
<td>88.27</td>
<td>80.97</td>
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Some examples of other PQLI scores were:

- China: 79.90
- Singapore: 91.32
- Bangladesh: 43.25
- Afghanistan: 20.86
- Saudi Arabia: 56.31
- Venezuela: 86.61
- Australia: 99.97

These statistics tend to support the view that, in terms of delivering the basics, the DPRK government has not been doing to badly up to now. However, it is only a matter of time before Asian capitalist countries like South Korea and Singapore, Malaysia and even Thailand, which are creating more wealth but distributing it less equally, are outstripping North Korea even on this criterion.

I hasten to add that in drawing attention to the long-term failings of North Korea’s overcentralised system, I am not endorsing laissez-faire capitalism as appropriate to either developing or developed countries. I reserve my admiration for countries like Sweden and Denmark which have shown the world that a balance can be struck between capitalist economic dynamism and a socialist commitment to universal welfare and equality of opportunity.

I also think it does not do to be too simplistically dismissive of North Korea and other communist countries on the grounds that people are denied political freedoms and the right to hold and promulgate whatever views they choose. Indeed, one eminently respectable Western academic, B. F. Skinner, in his well-known book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, has made out a plausible case that in today’s technologically advanced and concomitantly dangerous world, the values of freedom and dignity may be overrated and that a more controlled social order may be appropriate as long as people are subjected to sufficient ‘contingencies of reinforcement’ to maintain them in a contented frame of mind. It should also be remembered when conservative politicians justifiably castigate...
communist countries for violating human rights in punishing people who declare dissident political beliefs that there are other sacrosanct human rights, like the right to a home and the right to occupy a meaningful place in society. I saw no shopping-bag ladies in Moscow. There is no unemployment in North Korea. There are more homeless people in Great Britain that there are political prisoners in the Soviet Union. One can only speculate as to how many political prisoners are rotting away in prisons and labour camps in the 

\textit{DPRK}. I suspect rather few – the people are too well-controlled psychologically as well as physically – although the numbers are bound to rise as discontentment will inevitably increase with continuing economic failure. For, whatever moral perspective one adopts towards Kim Il Sung’s working people’s paradise, the fact remains that the inhabitants of North Korea lead narrow, frugal lives and the quality of their lives is currently deteriorating as the second two-hundred-day madness lurches along. And, while ever the present rigid system stultifies and infantilises the population, denying the people the information and resources they need to develop their understanding, and suppressing the wellsprings of imagination and initiative, nothing is going to get any better.

\textbf{Andrew Holloway, December 1988}