

# The Frozen North Is Thawing



Pyongyang—looking along the Taedong River

For several weeks beginning in September, groups of South Korean tourists traveled to North Korea for five-day visits. This was a milestone in that these were the first South Koreans to visit Pyongyang purely for the purpose of tourism. For many—especially those whose homeland is the northern half of the peninsula—this was not an ordinary vacation. And as the tours were the fruit of True Parents' movement for unification, they were consecrated to an important role in advancing the cause of peace.

Lee Kyung-hyun

Family Party Media Relations Dept., Korea

"I did not feel that I was a simple tourist but a peace emissary promoting the unification of the Koreans."

ON September 19, at 9:30 AM, a half hour after having departed from Incheon International Airport, Asiana flight OZ1348 entered the skies of North Korea, carrying the 100-strong second Pyongyang tourist group. "We've just entered North Korean air space," the captain announced.

At these words, the tourists turned as a body to look out of the windows. Unfortunately, they weren't able to get a clear view from an altitude of 10,000 feet above the sea in cloudy weather. On board were some passengers with ancestral roots in North Korea, known collectively as *Shilhyangmin*.<sup>1</sup> They had been yearning for the day they could freely fly over the barbed wire entanglements that lie just north of Imjingak.<sup>2</sup>

Among the party, there were also ordinary tourists, people simply heading off to a novel destination. Despite their different reasons for making the

journey, everyone gazed out of the window for a while. While most of the passengers were *Shilhyangmin*, looked at from another perspective, the group included professors, lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs and people of various other occupations. Forty percent of them were in their forties.

Previously, several flights along this sky route have been made for non-business purposes, most memorable perhaps being for the June 15, 2000, summit meeting between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il, but now, for the first time in fifty years, it is open for tourism. Our flight to Pyongyang took just an hour.

The route from the airport to the Potong River Hotel was adorned with cosmos blossoms and fields of harvest gold. Everyone was glad that this year there has been a good harvest. Our

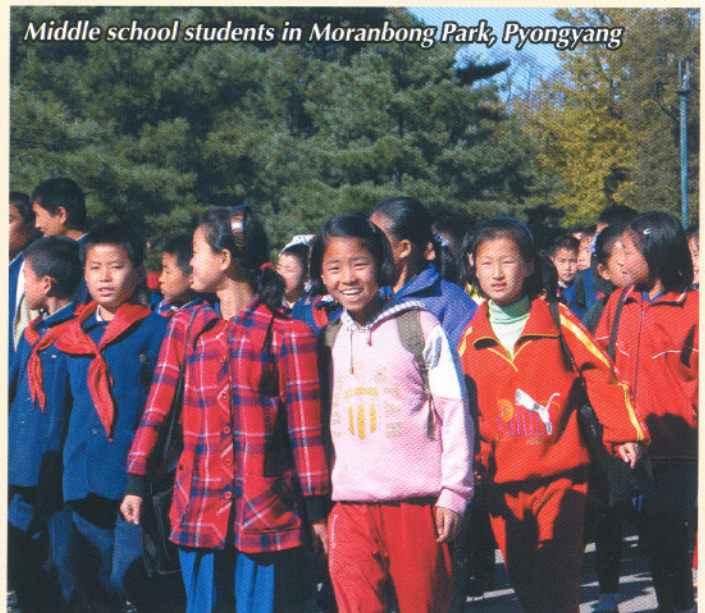
guide, Kim Nam-gil—a graduate of Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies—greeted us with the words, "We warmly welcome you to Pyongyang. Our schedule is tight, but we will do everything possible to make your stay satisfactory." This came as something of a relief. Kim Nam-gil proved a generous-hearted person who guided us throughout the tour. There were also a bus guide, Kim Jang-hyuk, a graduate of

Kim Il Sung University, a cameraman and a bus driver who accompanied the party throughout our five-day stay.

## In Pyongyang

Through the bus windows, we saw vegetable farms spreading into the distance. It seemed that as we approached the city the roads become more organized and the red and gray buildings turned pink and white. We could feel the spirit of the city as the citizens walked by. Since the 7.1 initiative,<sup>3</sup> many kiosks selling ice cream, drinks and fruit have sprung up. I inferred that this was because of this year's good harvest.

The population of Pyongyang is about two million. In the rural districts outside the city, there are rice fields and vegetable farms. During the tour we



Middle school students in Moranbong Park, Pyongyang

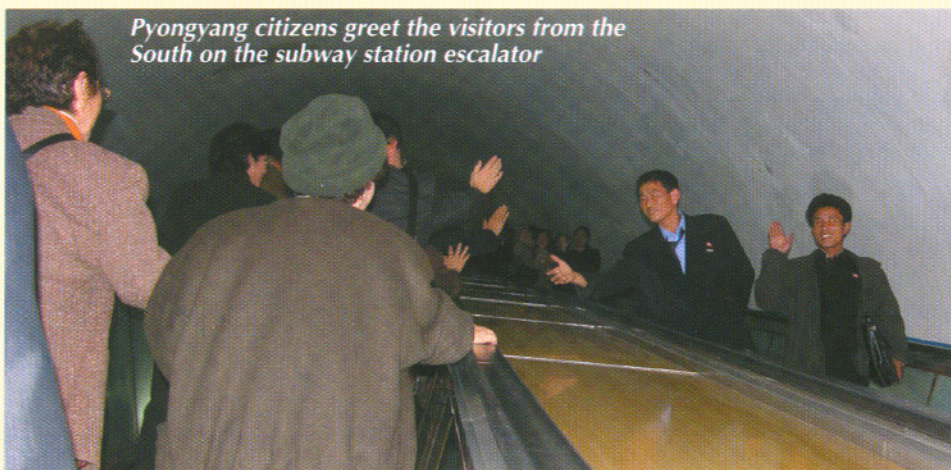
spent most of our time in Pyongyang, a city North Koreans hold in high esteem. Pyongyang from the top of the 170-meter high Juche Tower near the Taedong River is no less beautiful than cities in other nations. Pyongyang is only twenty meters above sea level, and the city's name refers to its broad, level plane. Its nickname is the "City of Willows," because there are many such trees there. You can see ancient willows with their branches dangling to the ground on the banks of the Taedong and Potong Rivers.

After unpacking and having lunch at our hotel, the party visited the birthplace of Kim Il-sung, which is called Mangyungdae. It is on very well decorated grounds, where pine trees soar high into the sky and more than three hundred and eighty types of flowers can be found. Nearby is Mangyungdae Amusement Park, which can hold up to ten thousand people. The guide referred to it as "the holy ground of the revolution" and "the people's cultural rest area." It was surprising that we were able to enter the amusement park in casual clothes, because the North Korean custom is for people (other than students in school uniforms) to wear either a suit or traditional Korean clothes.

From a pavilion on the ridge of a hill named Mangyungbong, Pyongyang can be seen spreading out from the Taedong River. The guide explained that six locks were built along the river's length, creating an artificial lake to prevent flooding.

### Entertainment, Shopping and Food

There were two opportunities to



*Pyongyang citizens greet the visitors from the South on the subway station escalator*

attend arts performances during this tour. The first took place in the cultural hall of Mangyung University. A choir performed, and there was singing and dancing for an hour and a half. On the final day, we were treated to an awe-inspiring performance by the Pyongyang Circus, which included figure skating, jump rope and acrobatics. We watched the performance as part of a mainly North Korean audience that included around two hundred students and military men and six other foreigners.

We went as a group to the Keumgangsang Gift Shop to buy souvenirs. It is located close to Gaesongmun<sup>4</sup> and in a general shopping area for residents of the nearby apartments. The Euro and American dollar are the main currencies accepted there. One tourist spent more than a \$1,000 on a 65-year old wild ginseng root, two bottles of liquor and some other goods. Most people purchased liquor, handicrafts, pictures and vegetable products such as mushrooms, sesame oil and red peppers.

The food served at the Potonggang ["Potong River"] Hotel was simple and tasty. Five to six different kinds of dishes were served. Kimchi is served at every meal alongside tasty dishes such as soybean soup, pollack, mushrooms, chicken, beef and squid. As beverages they'd prepared tea, pear drink,

Ponghak Beer and blueberry liquor, which were followed by ice cream, apples and pears for dessert. Professor Lee Ki-shik of Seoul National University expressed his satisfaction: "What you eat is as important as what you see during the tour. The food was delicious."

### The Road to Chungju

One special sightseeing program took us out to the rural districts. Running through Anju and Bakchan, the road to Chungju extends deep into the rural area of North Korea. The 112 km road was still being paved as we drove down it; I remember a young working man wearing Nike clothes and a girl pouring water on bricks as vehicles laid down asphalt.

In the garden of some two and three-story apartment houses, people were busily making charcoal briquettes, which are mainly used as fuel for heating. The houses on the street seemed newly designed. We passed Anju, an industrial city, where many pulp and chemical factories are located.

Among the party, Seoul National University professor Noh Yoong-hui and his brother (whose hometown is Chungju), and two others, were originally from Pyong-An Province.<sup>5</sup> Just for a moment, they felt relieved of the frustration that builds up from being away from their hometown for such a long time.

In Chungju we visited the birthplace of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, whose efforts lay behind the success of these tours.<sup>6</sup> People in the North say that Rev. Moon is doing a great deal to encourage the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. The Chungju part of the tour was canceled from the third tour group's itinerary due to the work to pave the road, which is expected to be completed by the end of the year. The itinerary was altered to include a visit to Tangun-

*Visitors from the South meet with students in Moranbong Park*



grung' and Bongsoo Church. Whatever the reason for the change was, the tourists were sorry they weren't able to see the North Korean countryside.

### Mt. Myohyang and Ryomoon Cave

The road to Mt. Myohyang is a four-lane road. Actually, there aren't any lanes marked. Sometimes people would even stop their cars on the side of the road just to take a break. We went to the Bohyun Buddhist Temple, where two monks famous for the spiritual power that they used in fighting Japanese, Seosan and Samyong, spent their monastic life. Here, in the international friendship exhibition, over 20,000 memorabilia<sup>8</sup> are displayed. After having lunch, we climbed Mt. Myohyang. This was the best opportunity to interact with North Korean residents. The sights along the two-kilometer path to Manpo Waterfall, which are actually four or five waterfalls in a row, were beautiful.

The way up was so steep that we needed to grab onto handrails and some passages were only a meter wide. People had to take turns to get through. "Hello, we came from Seoul," we would say. "Nice meeting you!" The local residents warmly responded.

At each place along the way locals brought us packed lunches and we sat in groups and ate as people sang and danced. "Our wish is for unity. Even our dreams are for unity..." The harmonious voices of the North and South Koreans echoed over Mt. Myohyang. One North Korean brought a four-year-old child, named Jin-hyuk, to shake hands with the tourists. In their hearts was the wish for us to live together in one unified nation.

"Would you like some octopus?" A kindly North Korean couple handed me two squids. Here in the North, they use the South Korean word for "octopus" to also mean "squid." Throughout the period of separation, many terms and meanings of words have diverged. But everyone still felt an unchanging bond of brotherhood and friendship and a heart of sharing.

Ryo Moon Cave is about thirty minutes away from Mt. Myohyang. There, painted on the walls seven kilometers down, is a record of ten thousand years of history. Depictions of a rice-sheaf, pig's hooves, snow-white flowers, waterfalls... and the *Charangtuh*

*The Beokkuki model, assembled by Pyonghwa Motors*



which reminds one of the shape of a man's and woman's reproductive organ. Fluent in telling stories and fairy tales, our guide kept the three groups of us laughing as we walked. We held a small singing contest on our way back in the bus. Our guide sang "Nice to Meet You" (*Pangapssumnida*) and "The person in my heart." Several among our group also sang, including a Christian missionary, Ms. Lee Yong-ae, who sang "Seoul Tango," changing the lyrics to "Pyongyang Tango." Calls for an encore came from the audience. The bus shone with the unified golden souls of the people from North and South.

### The Road to Nampo

The highway from Pyongyang heading straight to Nampo<sup>9</sup> is called the "The Young Hero Road." This road is a 100-meter wide 10 lane highway with a bicycle path on each side.

Our guide explained that it was build during the "Marching Period of Suffering"<sup>10</sup> by the hands of young men

using only hammers, shovels, and sand bags. "When a sand bag ripped," he said, "they tore their clothes and made patches to repair the bags. This road was completed through their tears and blood as they struck boulders over three hundred times each to break them." He added, "The equipment they used is now housed in a museum."

While passing through Tokhung village in the Gangseo region, he explained, "Here you can find carbonated water which is good for the digestive system. People from Pyongyang come here on bicycles to get it."

Pyonghwa Motors was also one of the hot spots of this tour. It is a successful model of a joint venture between the North and South. With Rev. Moon's support, Pyonghwa Motors was built just outside the city of Nampo. The company's name is carved in bold letters on its front gates. From some things that our guide said, such as, "In our nation, this is the only company that has been able to boldly put up a sign," we were able to catch several hints that the government intends to promote the company. The government has already ordered three hundred cars and set a policy regulating the import of foreign-made cars in order to support Pyonghwa Motors. Pyongyang's highway billboards are advertising the company's products and there are advertisements in the newspapers. This will be North Korea's first venture into capitalistic marketing.

Pyonghwa Motors is a joint venture with the Ryonbong Corporation; its yearly goal is the assembly of a hundred thousand vehicles. Factory buildings under construction are spread over several acres of land and to date, just one out of the planned ten is complete. For thirty minutes we observed and took pictures of the production line of the *Whiparam* (Whistle) model, a car with a 1500cc engine, and a leisure vehicle called the *Beokkuki* (Cuckoo).

### The Final Day

After dinner, the tourist party enjoyed the evening at standing bars, karaoke bars and billiard halls. At a standing bar, the guide and the tourists conversed freely. They spoke openly about topics such as the outbreak of the Korean War, the Hyo-soon and Mi-soon incident<sup>11</sup>, North-South unification, and various sensitive issues closely tied to

*Waiting for a bus in Pyongyang*



ideological viewpoints. In the midst of such engrossing conversation, no one noticed how quickly time passed.

One forty-three-year-old tourist from Seoul who took part in these conversations commented, "I realized that a big ideological difference still exists between us. In one sense, having that confirmed was a bitter experience. On the other hand, the fact that we talked about sensitive issues is itself a big change." Despite the difference in perspectives on issues, reconciliation starts from the point of showing respect toward one another's opinions. If that doesn't happen, there will never be a starting point. I felt that we are in an urgent time when the scholars and experts in each area must work to clarify the facts of history toward a consensus.

In the morning, we were also able to jog along the Potong River. A tourist who went out jogging explained, "I didn't jog for long because people were staring at me, perhaps because I wore shorts. But I sometimes saw Pyongyang residents or students jogging."

It seemed that our five-days in the North had passed in a flash. After dinner on the last full day, the hotel workers sang "Let's meet again" for us. At that moment, we all felt that the time to say farewell was upon us. The lights of the Potong River Hotel glittered throughout that night.

As these mottoes—"Let's follow Kim Jong-Il and his will until the end," "Although the road is tough, let's laugh our way through it," and "Do not live today for today, but for tomorrow,"—express, North Korea is a nation strongly emphasizing philosophy and politics; and yet its economy is so very poor.

### On the Way Home

Despite the differences in ideology, North and South Koreans are people of the same blood. Our stay was very

short, but through smiles, warm handshakes, singing and dancing together, and other expressions of conciliatory hearts, we were able to see the possibility for unity with the pure-hearted people living at the foot of the beautiful North Korean mountains. Wherever we went, we were able to experience the true character of the people. Those tourists who were nervous when they first came to Pyongyang now feel comfort at having been there. It is becoming a place where anyone can visit.

On the flight back to Incheon, the

unification activities. One Dr. Yoon Sang-won said, "We were easily able to harmonize with the North Korea residents through singing and dancing. If the politicians could work for the future of our tribes and nations, putting aside their personal ambition, the unification of North and South Korea would come soon."

Unification cannot be realized through words. Just a policy itself is not sufficient. This is not an issue only for the politicians and leaders. It starts from each individual and from the spot

where he or she stands. This Pyongyang tour is not an ordinary tour. Despite the difference in theory, unification starts from a connection with people who have the same blood. The stronger our wish to reunite, and the more we put reconciliation into action, the closer North and South will come together. Likewise, the deeper their capacity to interact becomes, the greater the number of tour sites we can have access to, and the more often South-erners meet Northerners, the quicker the day of unity will come.



*A street scene; at back, a building is being painted*

passengers silently read newspapers. It didn't exactly seem like one of the business flights from Seoul to Busan, but the day will come when business flights between Seoul and Pyongyang are routine. Several tourists said that they did not consider ours an ordinary tour but a mission for unification. A Kyongnam University professor of Political Science, Kim Kun-shik, had this evaluation: "There were many opportunities to meet ordinary North Korean residents. I am sure the tour will contribute to the reconciliation of North and South Korea in many ways."

Jun Hong-yeon, a dentist, said, "Through this period, I've recognized that the unification problem is my problem as well." He expressed his determination to participate in North-South

Still, we will need to be able to provide them a new view of the world. I believe unification will be possible when we truly practice giving true love. As we interact, misunderstanding slowly shifts to the point of mutual understanding. Our interest in coming together should increase. Each among those on the tour seemed to have returned with the feeling of pride to have done something for unification and peace.

"Our wish is the unification of our homeland—to live together as one." This is the common wish expressed by North Koreans in general. Though they may be poor, deep inside they have a spirit that we have lost. Chasing money, fame and power, South Korea today is rapidly degrading herself with sexual

*CONTINUED ON PAGE 39....NORTH KOREA*

Mr. Cho Sung-rak of the Family Party speaks to tour participants in North Korea; middle, with teachers of a famous Pyongyang kindergarten; right, some of its pupils



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31....**NORTH KOREA** licentiousness and family breakdown.

As we arrived back at Incheon Airport in South Korea, I reflected with deep seriousness about our role in the historical cause of reunification that history and the present era beckon us to champion.♦

#### Endnotes

1 *Shilhyangmin*: people who've lost their hometowns; displaced people

2 Imjingak is an observation tower, which, when built in 1972, was the northernmost point in South Korea from which North Korea could be viewed.

3 "The 7.1 Initiative" refers to the dramatic introduction of market reforms in North Korea on July 1, 2002. At a stroke, the price of staple goods was increased—the price of rice rose by 55,000 percent; the North Korean currency was devalued by approximately 6,800 percent in relation to the U.S. dollar; wages were greatly increased and a wage tier system was introduced that placed workers into two vastly different economic categories. Source: <http://www.nautilus.org>

4 A gate based on the design of and named after the Arc de Triomphe in Paris

5 Father is from North Pyong-an Province, and Mother from South Pyong-an Province

6 Most of the participants on the tours were not associated with our movement.

7 Said to be the tomb of Tangun, the mythical

founder of Korea

8 These are gifts given by, among others, representatives of foreign governments to Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il. [See April and November/December 2002 issues of *Today's World* for more.]

9 On the West Coast

10 An English translation of the North Korean term for the devastation their country underwent in the 1990s when drought and floods led to crop failures and starvation

11 This refers to the July 13, 2002, road accident, in which two 14-year-old girls, Shin Hyo-soon and Shim Mi-soon, were run over and killed by a U.S. army vehicle during a military exercise. Their deaths aroused anger among those who oppose a U.S. military presence in Korea.