

1974**North Korean Journey: A View of Workers'
Democracy****Citation:**

"North Korean Journey: A View of Workers' Democracy", 1974, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Enclosed in Korea Focus 2, no. 3 (January-February 1974). Obtained by Brandon Gauthier. <https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/121138>

Summary:

Fred Carrier reports on a visit to North Korea made by the AKFIC in June-July 1973.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

North Korean Journey:
A VIEW OF WORKERS' DEMOCRACY

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A delegation from the American-Korean Friendship and Information Center consisting of Joseph Brande, executive director and Korea Focus editor; Fred Carrier, co-chairman; and Prof. Robert Ante, director of education, visited the Democratic People's of Korea from June 19 to July 3, 1973 as guests of the Korean Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and of the Korean people. The accompanying article was written on behalf of the delegation.

Korea put its best foot forward at once through its children. Shortly after landing in Pyongyang, the strain of a long journey half-way round the world was eased when three children, girls about the age of 10 decked in colorful native costumes, met us at the ramp of our plane to present us with bouquets of flowers and welcoming smiles which cut through the necessary officialdom.

While the children were obviously schooled in the performance, it was equally clear that they were deeply sincere-an impression that was often felt during our visit. The child who came forward to me took my hand tightly between her two small hands and did not let go for the next ten minutes through pictures and the long walk to a waiting limousine. In her radiant eyes and a periodic tugging of my hand I could read her feelings. She understood that I was a foreigner who had come to her beloved country, the land of Kim Il Sung and socialism, out of friendship.

It was her duty- and how seriously she carried it through!- to make me aware of the friendship of the Korean people for those who come in friendship. She represented a human counterpart to the official recognition by the People's Government that there is another America that does not condone imperialism or seek to hold back the tides of national liberation sweeping across the Third World.

A few hours later from the seventh-story balcony adjoining my suite at the spanking new Portong Hotel, I watched children playing in a nearby schoolyard. Their laughs could have sounded anywhere in the world. Their only distinguishing sign was a uniform of dark blue skirts or trousers topped by white blouses and red neck-scarves. Another group of children, this time boys, chanced by through the garden separating the hotel from the school yard. They were students, too, enroute somewhere. Not quite marching, they nonetheless seemed to be clustered behind a recognized leader.

It seemed fitting that the children should welcome us for Korea is a youthful land. Paradoxical as this may seem, for Pyongyang itself is 1,500 years old, it characterizes the current generations who have been born in a socialist era. More than half of the population is under 30 which means their memories can stretch only to the Korean War, if that far, while the rest of Korea's colonial experience is something learned from tales spun by their parents or from school.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is so busy erasing the colonial mentality and constructing an independent industrial economy that the youth express the fundamental character of the country: confidence pride, devotion to the revolution. Everything has been built in the current generation, for the bombing carried out by

the U.S. in 1950-1951 virtually destroyed urban-industrial Korea. The U.S. military command prided itself on a job well done, having leveled every important target in Korea. Thus the reconstruction of a People's Korea under socialism has been a liberating process from backwardness and colonialism, and a regenerating process born out of destruction.

The School System

At the center of the Korean Revolution are the children who have been termed "the flower buds of the country" by Kim Il Sung. Insofar as socialism blossoms it will be through its children. Certainly the People's Republic is sparing no effort to prepare an educated, disciplined, technically competent youth.

We had ample opportunity to observe the workings of an educational system which embraces an 11-year compulsory program ranging from kindergarten through higher middle school, and beyond that technical schools or the university for those best qualified.

At the Sin Hueng Senior Middle School in Pyongyang, science is taught in well-equipped classrooms. The teacher demonstrates the technique being studied, then groups of about five students around work-tables watch while one of their members repeats the experiment. Each student that I observed had a notebook he neatly provided with ample notes and illustrations.

In other studies, too, here is a mixture of theory with practice. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this was a class conducted at the Students' and Children's Palace in Pyongyang where a group of teenagers were learning the theory of the combustion engine, the mechanical workings of a tractor, how to actually drive a tractor, and literally how to take apart and repair the machine. At an appropriated point in his learning process the student is provided opportunity to use the tractor as part of the work done on a cooperative farm.

The head teacher at Sin Hueng seemed surprised when I asked about disciplinary problems, so I hastened to explain the serious disorder prevalent in urban schools in the U.S. He said that only rarely did Korean teachers have disciplinary problems. Education is so highly valued in his country, and the sense of its practical importance so strong in the thoughts of students, that there is a general attitude of serious effort. When some problem does arise, however, the pressure from peers exerted through student organizations is always sufficient to correct it.

Such was one simple evidence of the working of socialism, supported by the order in each classroom, the neatness of student notebooks, the clean halls and playgrounds (policed and raked each morning, rain or shine, by student work forces). What a relief it was to travel about and never see a broken school window! It was also encouraging to learn that at Sin Hueng there is a ratio of one teacher for every 17 students. Insofar as the People's Republic has a problem, it is not one of unemployed teachers but of how to provide more teachers for its rapidly expanding system.

Education is something of a mania in socialist Korea. Perhaps the single most telling fact is that all Koreans, young and old, lay aside all other tasks each Saturday afternoon to spend two hours in study.

It is a marvelous collective effort to amend the deficiencies of the past, to raise political consciousness, to expand technical knowledge, and to create a cultural climate that inspires intellectual as well as physical effort. Viewing the same phenomenon statistically, a generation ago all of Korea lacked even one university or higher technical school. Today, in the People's Republic alone there are more than

500 technical schools to train skilled labor and another 140 institutions of higher learning. Kim Il Sung University is the largest with 11,000 full-time students.

At the Palace for Students and Children in Pyeongyang, a massive building with 500 rooms, we spent an enjoyable Sunday afternoon observing some of the 10,000 youth who make use of its facilities every day. A large staff of teachers, artists, technicians and athletes were guiding young people in endeavors that ranged from pure pleasure to pure politics.

In one class a group of girls about 12 or 13 years old were studying the 100-year history of U.S. imperialism toward Korea. Most of the activities were otherwise, such as gymnastics, wrestling, painting, radio repair, machine shop. In one dance studio a group of girls about the age of 10 put on a near-professional performance of modern dance and classical ballet.

Later that evening we saw the fruit of such musical training at a performance of the national Children's Orchestra and Choir, conducted by a 15-year-old boy. A ballet in honor of the revolution was a stirring part of the performance.

Industrial Growth

Such educational accomplishments are an outgrowth of the industrial revolution that Korea is carrying out with careful planning. Only a rapidly growing core of technicians could provide means to afford such extensive education for all the people, while at the same time only a rapidly growing core of technicians could staff the new industry, the hospitals and clinics which dot the whole country, and the schools themselves.

At Hamhung, one of the major industrial centers, we saw huge factories producing chemicals, fertilizer, machinery and textiles. One of the most impressive plants is the Yong Sun Machine-Building Factory whose 10,000 workers are producing the equipment used in mining, processing of ores, generation of water and steam-power, and in a wide range of manufacturing. It was a fascinating experience to watch a 3,000-ton press shape molten steel into a custom piece of machinery to be used in expanding socialist industry. What became evident by this operation is that the People's Republic is capable of producing its own heavy industry in whatever special fields it chooses.

The DPRK is no longer dependent solely on export of its raw materials, characteristic of a colonial economy, but it has the capacity to change its abundant resources of minerals and power into capital goods which will form the backbone of an industrial society.

At the February 8 Vinylon Factory, which produces enough fiber annually to provide two outfits of clothing for everyone in the country, we experienced the special satisfaction Koreans take in this plant, for vinylon is a *juche* product. Unable to grow cotton because of its climate, socialist Korea developed a synthetic fabric made from its own resources of limestone and anthracite. Vinylon is thus a totally home-made product utilizing domestic resources in a process invented by a Korean chemist.

All of the equipment in the February 8 plant is also a product of Korea's new industry! No wonder vinylon has become an important symbol of *juche*, which means independence and self-reliance. In textiles as in many other areas of production Korea has liberated its economy from colonialism—that is, from dependence on a more developed industrial economy which provides manufactures at high prices while taking raw materials at low prices.

Juche sometimes takes exaggerated forms as in the Sinchon Museum on the Korean War where no mention was made of the role played by the Chinese army in driving American invaders back below the 38th parallel. There are humorous aspects, too, such as occurred in the Palace of National Culture when we chided our hosts about the plastic representations of Kim Il Sung produced by Korean artists. What revolutionary hardened by four decades of struggle would not show a wrinkle on his face!

But our host, the director of the museum, was cordial with our "capitalist" esthetics and with a knowing grin promised to take it up with the artists on Monday. These minor diversions, however, did not detract from the impression we gained that Korea's juche is a necessary counteractive to a long colonial experience, most recently of the division of the Korean people by U.S. imperialism. To counter powerful imperialist forces and to propel a small, youthful socialist state toward greater strength, juche is a means of evoking collective revolutionary consciousness.

The gains of industry indicate that the People's Republic has followed a sound economic policy. By 1970 the country was producing in just 12 days the equivalent of its total industrial production for 1944 (the last pre-liberation year). What country of the Third World would not envy such a feat?

At the time of our visit, midway through the current plan which runs from 1971-1976, the attempt was being made to more than double 1970 production by the end of the Six Year Plan. From the results attained by June of 1973, with mid-plan quotas already attained, the 1976 goal is within reach.

Everywhere we went we found people hard at work, testifying to the great effort that lies behind economic growth. And behind hard work lies the expanding political consciousness of the masses. "When the masses are aroused by political education, they can exert remarkable strength," a plant manager explained. Given careful planning, the success of plans depends upon a high degree of political consciousness among workers.

New High-Rise Apartments

Far and away the most striking evidence of the benefits of hard work are the bright new high-rise apartments that abound in Pyongyang, Hamhung and everywhere else. Made from prefabricated concrete blocks that form rooms, these apartments range from four to twelve stories in height. Most of the urban workers live in such buildings, enjoying central heating, running water, electricity and clean, safe surroundings.

We visited one such apartment belonging to a nurse, Li Yon Kyong, whom we encountered by chance as she returned from her night shift at the hospital. She was gracious enough to invite us for a visit. Her husband was already gone to work, and her two small children were safely ensconced in a nursery. We sat on cushions in what might be called a living room. It was simply furnished within a desk and chair, bookcase, portable closet, and TV. Another room of the same size contained a small bed, several cabinets and dresses, and an electric sewing machine. Both of these rooms serve as bedrooms at night with mats providing additional bedding. There was also a small kitchen and a bathroom. For this apartment Mrs. Li and her husband pay approximately two percent of their family income.

While such quarters are small compared to more affluent American standards, they mark a vast improvement in the lives of most Koreans. It is a fair judgment to say that in socialist Korea the mass of people are better housed than anywhere in Asia. If one adds the social conditions surrounding these neighborhoods- the absence of anything resembling ghetto conditions, cultural deprivation, poverty, violence, drugs,

sexual hazards- then the apartments of Pyongyang provide better living conditions than large sections of cities like New York or Philadelphia.

Conditions in the rural areas are also rapidly improving because the People's Republic has given high priority to raising the peasants to cultural equality with urban workers. Part of the drudgery of farm labor has been alleviated by machinery which performs the heavy work in the fields. Every cooperative farm also enjoys a complete irrigation system with a network of canals and pumping stations. All peasant homes have electricity and by the end of 1976 will have running water. At the Pong Dal Cooperative Farm, not far from Hamhung, household incomes are comparable to these of urban workers. The farm has a small hospital staffed by a doctor and nurses, a school, nursery facilities, two stores. Nearby there is an advanced agricultural school, so that Pong Dai already boasts 80 engineers and assistant engineers among its 700 workers.

Everywhere in the People's Republic, on its farms or in its cities, one has the sense of a decent society in which equalitarianism prevails. There is no wealthy class but there is no longer any poverty, either. Everyone enjoys a certain richness of life that has to do with purposiveness and security.

Pyongyang, where one million people live, has streets which are clean and safe at night. The only policemen visible are traffic directors who are unarmed. The stores are not lavish with luxuries but good foods are plentiful while everyone in the country is decently clothed. There is a sense of energy and purpose as people move to their jobs or to their studies. It is a busy country, bursting with revolutionary fervor, for there is so much to be done. Within the revolution one can find an outlet for his human aspirations and at the same time enjoy a great sense of security without fear of unemployment, inflation, pollution, exorbitant medical expenses, racial oppression, inability to afford education.

One great concern does weigh upon the people: the fear of renewed warfare with South Korea and the U.S. Korea is a divided nation due to the politics of the Cold War and continuing U.S. imperialism. More than 40,000 American soldiers are in South Korea with additional massive air support including nuclear weapons. At any time this could spell destruction of all that socialist Korea has worked so hard to build. Time and again the people we talked with asked us to work for the removal of American soldiers from Korea so that Koreans can work out their own problems.

Remembering the enormous destruction wrought by U.S. military power in Korea during the 1950's and the more recent horrors inflicted upon the Vietnamese people, could we do any less for Koreans and for ourselves?