



PERSPECTIVES

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Visiting North Korea: Creating a “Right” Narrative

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: I recently visited North Korea – a choice viewed by some as an automatic legitimization of the regime, though visits by foreigners do not by any means connote blanket approval of the government. On the contrary: they provide an opportunity to view the country first-hand and draw one’s own conclusions. The visitor must always bear in mind, however, that the view the government permits him to have of the country is closely proscribed.

In April 2019, I visited North Korea on a private organized tour, which means I was the only tourist in the group. The format allowed me to focus on things that interested me and to ask many questions. I was accompanied around the clock by two wonderful North Korean tour guides and a driver. The sites I was able to visit were those places designated by the government as permissible for foreigners. (Due to the US sanctions, financial transactions are not allowed with North Korea. The North Korean tourism industry thus operates on a cash-only basis, or with foreign companies that bypass the sanctions.)

Visiting North Korea as a foreign tourist raises the ethical question of political legitimization. While some claim that the very act of visiting legitimizes the regime, I would argue that visiting the country does not connote approval of the government. North Korea, like other problematic states, might try to use the fact of foreign tourism as an indicator of legitimacy, but tourists do not automatically conform to the government’s preferred way of thinking. They are free to draw their own conclusions from their visit, depending on their own political and social ideologies. In most cases, the experience of visiting the DPRK does not change foreign tourists’ attitude about it.

Visiting the DPRK with official North Korean tour guides who are following state protocol means the tourist will only hear the official narrative. That narrative, as is true in other non-democratic and even democratic countries, is a key tool with which the state attempts to sway visitors toward a particular view. Other narratives, such as the South Korean and the American, are also biased or fake, to a degree.

When one compares the war museums in Pyongyang and Seoul, one can see that both states are trying to represent their narratives in a way that will serve their interests. (In the case of the North Korean war museum, the Cold War narrative is emphasized, using slogans that were used in those days.)

Throughout the trip, the North Korean guides do their best to convince the foreigners in their charge that their country is inaccurately portrayed by the international media. North Korea is trying, much as other states do, to convince tourists to become goodwill ambassadors. In so doing, Pyongyang is trying to change the country's negative image abroad.

One of the tour guides' biggest challenges is to convince tourists that what they are seeing with their own eyes is not what they think it is. One example is the evident poverty of the rural areas. One could blame international sanctions as the reason for the economic crisis in North Korea, or one could raise the question – which the tour guides cannot – of whether the current political system should open up and allow foreign companies into the country.

Tourism has become an important source of foreign currency income for the North Korean economy. The Pyongyang Marathon, the Mass Dance (Kim Il-sung's birthday celebration), and the Mass Games have become important dates for tourist visits. These events allow Pyongyang to "brand" North Korea in the eyes of foreigners.

The North Korean regime hopes tourism will increase foreign income and change foreign perceptions. It contains the risk, however, that tourists might bring ideas and information into North Korea that the state prefers to block.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz, a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is an expert on East Asian security, the Korean Peninsula, and Asian international organizations.