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Inside North Korea

An Interview with Christine Ahn

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Global Research, September 23, 2008
Counterpunch.org 17 September 2008

Region: Asia
In-depth Report: NORTH KOREA

At a time when speculation and rumors about events in North Korea abound, it should be noted how little of what one reads about that nation is grounded in concrete knowledge and experience. Partly this is due to the North Koreans' tight hold on the dissemination of information, but it also results from the preference of Western journalists for dealing in boilerplate generalizations and cartoon images. It is not often that one can get an inside view of the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea – the formal name for North Korea], however circumscribed the travel routes. Christine Ahn, one of the foremost activists on Korean and globalization issues, visited North Korea in early July, just days after the demolition of the cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. She shares her experiences in the DPRK with us.

You've just returned from the DPRK. As co-coordinator, you helped organize this trip under the auspices of the DPRK Education and Exposure Program (DEEP). Tell us about DEEP and your reasons for organizing this expedition.

[Ahn] The DPRK Education and Exposure Program was started in 2001 by a group of Korean Americans living in New York who were inspired by the reunification talks underway between the north and south. The goal was to bring young, socially-minded Korean-Americans to the northern part of our homeland to see and experience North Korea with an open mind and heart, which is definitely challenging because of the vilification of North Koreans by the media and the governments of the United States and South Korea. We expect participants to read a tremendous amount about Korean history, especially the experience of Koreans under Japanese colonization and the Korean War, as well as current issues facing North Korea, such as the famine, de-nuclearization and human rights. In addition, we organize a fundraising drive each year to raise money to purchase essential medical supplies to donate to a hospital in Pyongyang.

This was the 7th DEEP delegation and the largest and most diverse delegation with Koreans coming from New York, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area. But we also had Korean Canadians and some Korean Americans who grew up in Japan, which made our understanding of the relationship between war and division and the migration of Koreans much more multifaceted! For ten days, we traveled throughout Pyongyang, Sariwon and Kaesong. We visited many historical sites, and had the chance to interact with students from the Pyongyang Architecture and Planning University and from the Youth League. We met with officials from the Women's League and the head of the Maternity Hospital in Pyongyang. We also attended several lectures with a professor from the Pyongyang University of Education and the head of the Medical Doctors Association to better understand the social and economic conditions facing North Korea. We also spoke at length

with two elderly men who were unconverted long-term political prisoners that were repatriated to North Korea after spending nearly 40 years in South Korean prisons. It was a very jam-packed trip with so much to observe, absorb, and process. Although we realize we saw only a small part of the country, we feel fortunate to have seen and experienced as much as we did on this part of our divided homeland.

I would like to start with Kaesong. What is the town like? I'm interested in both what the town is like in terms of daily life there, and in terms of architecture and historical sites dating back to the period of the Koryo Dynasty, when Kaesong was the capital of Korea. Did you see anything of the industrial complex there? There are now 72 South Korean firms operating at the Kaesong industrial complex, which is undergoing rapid expansion. The number of North Korean workers at these plants now numbers over 30,000. Did your hosts have any comments on Kaesong? Also, Kaesong is a fair distance from Pyongyang. Did you see anything of particular interest along the way?

[Ahn] Kaesong is approximately two hours south of Pyongyang. My sense when we drove through the center of the city was that the architecture, much like Pyongyang, seemed to be of the Soviet-style era, and things seemed to be bleaker there than in the capital. There were few cars on the road, many people on bicycles and workers in the fields. As for the industrial complex, I remember seeing massive construction machinery beyond a wall along the road, but we weren't able to go on a tour of the complex. When I asked one of our guides what they thought about capitalism seeping out from Kaesong, his response was that because the people of Kaesong have lived so close to the DMZ, they are among the most politicized in the country. I also recall that North Koreans viewed Kaesong as a model of "tongil," or reunification, and that it would be a microcosm of how the challenges, as well as the nuts and bolts, of reunification would be negotiated.

The drive down there was breathtakingly beautiful–lush fields of farmland and rolling green hills. When we drove to Panmunjom along the DMZ—ironically enough on the 4th of July—you could see why it is one of the most ecologically diverse regions in the world. Despite apparently having 1.2 million land mines planted along the DMZ, for miles it is just lush green farmland with snowy egrets everywhere.

From the North Korean side, you look across at the towering South Korean/US building. There are large surveillance cameras and as one participant noted, the building had a "nightmarish quality akin to Terminator 2." On the side of the building facing North Korea is a sign with the words in Korean, "House of Freedom." As we looked from the rooftop across the DMZ, we asked one of our guides what he thought about that sign and his response was, "People who know least what that term means throw it around the most." One of my colleagues on the trip noted that when she lived in South Korea, she deliberately avoided visiting the DMZ because one could only do so on a tour with the USO. As we left Punmunjom on the North Korean side, we drove under a cement archway that read in large Korean characters, Chaju Tongil, "reunification on our own terms."

After the DMZ, we then visited the Tomb of King Wang Gun, the Koryo Historical Museum, and Sunjuk Bridge. The Tomb of Wang Gun was reconstructed after Kim Il Sung had visited the site. Our guide shared many allegories about the King and Kim Il Sung's visit, but the one that stuck in my memory was about King Wang Gun's advisors. Like many kings, Wang Gun had a military, political and economic advisor, but he also had a dream interpreter. This advisor, however, had a penchant for drinking and so the King forbade him to drink more than just one bowl full of wine a day, which the dream interpreter translated to mean a jug.

This angered the King who then imprisoned him for 12 years, but thereafter released him and forgave him. Behind the tomb was a stone shaped into a lotus that symbolized the period before the Confucianist era when Buddhism reigned.

We also went to two other places, the Koryo Historical Museum and the Sunjuk Bridge. We arrived at the Koryo Historical Museum quite late, and because there was no electricity it was difficult to see the artifacts and paintings. Clearly much of the museum's artifacts were recreated either because the original was destroyed in the war or pillaged. In any case, the Song Gyun Gwan–the building adjacent to the museum–was a study hall where yangbans (scholars) would take exams. They pointed out that the building was 400 years older than the one in Seoul and built during the Koryo period.

We then went to the Sunjuk Bridge where our guides shared another allegory about a dual that took place between Lee Song-Gae, a leader from Chosun and Chong Mong-Joo from the Koryo dynasty. Chong Mong-Joo was murdered on the bridge where a bamboo, which symbolizes loyalty, later grew. The stone bridge story seemed to be told as a narrative of transition and to convey that Chosun did not efface Koryo or obliterate the past, but instead chose to enshrine and pay homage to the past. How that should be interpreted today remains ambiguous. What all these stories mean, I cannot even begin to interpret, but it is worth noting how these ancient historical sites were actually re-created after Kaesong was completely destroyed. What remains is a handful of artifacts and the oral histories to preserve Korea's past.

Did you have an opportunity to observe anything of agricultural development there?

[Ahn] On the day we traveled to visit the Sinchon massacre museum, we spent the morning visiting Migok cooperative farm in Sariwon, in Hwanghae Province. This was my sixth visit to a farm in North Korea, and I was overwhelmed by the resources available to this farm. We first visited the farm's museum, which documented the history of the farm's development, including photos of North Korean farmers rebuilding after war, as well as photos of visits made by both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. I remember vividly a black and white photograph of Koreans, definitely taken over 50 years ago since most of the women and men were wearing traditional Korean attire. The image captures them celebrating the completion of a canal system for irrigation—the first one for the cooperative farm. There were numerous photos of Kim Il Sung giving advice to farmers in the fields and sitting casually with peasants, as well as farmers standing proudly alongside a row of new tractors. This farm was clearly beloved by Kim Il Sung and heavily invested in as a model farm.

The farm was impressive. The primary crop grown was rice and for miles there were tracts of lush green rice fields surrounded by a sophisticated irrigation system. Surrounding the rice fields were large subdivisions of housing, largely apartment building-looking structures. We stopped into a home that looked just as modern as one you would find in a South Korean farming village. In the front of our host's home was a well-organized garden that grew vegetables, flowers and medicinal plants. Along the road were rows of trees and people on bicycles and the occasional oxen-pulled cart.

We then stopped in an area of the farm where we were greeted by dozens of young farmers who looked hearty and healthy. They warmly welcomed us to a lunch they prepared in a large dining hall in a building with dorm rooms, showers and bathrooms, and classrooms. There is a thriving collective culture around singing in both North and South Korea, and after

sitting down for a meal an accordion appeared and the North Korean farmers sang quite beautifully, much better I'm sorry to say than we did! I was really struck by how farmers and peasants in North Korea were so revered–as they should be–because of the role that they play in the society. The world over, farmers are treated so badly, laboring all their lives in the fields to grow food to feed us all, yet many of them never earn enough to feed their own families or learn to read.

We ended our visit by harvesting cucumbers and planting bellflower with the young farmers. I looked around the farm with amazement at how well organized and manicured the farm appeared. They had a duck farm, large patches of vegetable gardens, greenhouses, and every spare inch of space was used for something, whether vegetables or fruit trees. As throughout the country, there were political posters and slogans to inspire their collective spirits and drive to work harder for the nation. When we were saying goodbye, it was a very emotional moment to know that unless reunification is realized, the possibility of our meeting again was slim. And who knows when that will be and what awful things could happen before then.

On the long drive back from Sariwon, our guide Mr. Shin asked me what I thought about the fields and how the harvest looked as someone who studied agriculture. I could see that there were vegetable gardens everywhere–in the countryside as well as throughout Pyongyang–as well as side-croppings alongside vast tracts of rice paddies. I could see how organized they were to maximize food production. So I responded that it looked very good and productive, but in the back of my mind I thought to myself how vulnerable they must feel about the looming summer rains that could wipe out their entire harvest for the season.

North Korea has certainly had more than its share of agricultural misfortunes due to adverse weather. And with 80 percent of its territory being mountainous, the amount of land available for growing food is limited, making the nation's food supply all the more vulnerable to weather patterns. Your delegation clearly connected with your hosts at the Migok collective farm on a personal level, even joining together in song. One of the difficulties in ascertaining the state of affairs in North Korea is that delegations tend to be taken to the same places and one wonders what the norm is for people living there. Yet because your delegation consisted of Korean-Americans and Korean-Canadians, I suspect that your group was able to connect on a much more personal level than is usually the case. You may have seen more than most groups do, and presumably your interactions were on a deeper level. Do you feel this was the case?

[Ahn] Absolutely. I have now been to North Korea three times and although I have had the opportunity to revisit places that I have seen before, I've also had the privilege of visiting many new places. But I would venture to say that Koreans, whether from the United States, Canada, Brazil or elsewhere in the diaspora have a special place in the hearts of the people in North Korea. I think they view Koreans in the diaspora as members of a lost tribe who were forced to emigrate elsewhere because the country was not strong or united enough to ward off invasion or occupation. And for many of us who cannot speak our native language, it's quite sad. Language is so vital to understanding one's cultural and ancestral heritage, and it's heart-breaking when you cannot communicate. I was born in Seoul and emigrated to the United States when I was three and as my parents were already pretty elderly and worked in L.A.'s Koreatown, they never learned English, which prevented them from assimilating into American society. Meanwhile, as I was assimilating into American society and speaking English only, I lost my ability to communicate with them beyond the most basics. This is tremendously sad, and I'm not alone. And I think the North Koreans see this

and feel very empathetic towards us.

On our trip was a young woman who is an elementary school teacher in the Bay Area. She was born Kay Fischer to an American father and a Korean mother, and she later changed the spelling to Kei. She grew up thinking she was half-Japanese until her mother confessed that she was actually Korean. Her mother, a second-generation Korean born and raised in Japan, explained that she withheld this knowledge because her father had avoided teaching her and her siblings Korean or about their Korean heritage. Kei's mother explained to her that she had withheld this information because, like her father, she wanted to protect Kei in Japanese society, which heavily discriminated against Koreans. Kei explains that despite her grandfather's efforts to protect her mother through assimilation into Japanese society, she still experienced the hardship because his experiences were so horrible.

Furthermore, since we are a delegation of Korean Americans and Canadians who want to also contribute towards building peace between our newly adopted countries and our native homelands, I think they are trying to give us much history, access, and perspective. The DEEP program is not a tourist trip—it's about building solidarity with the people of North Korea, to understand why they have built the society they have, and how our lives are so intertwined and influenced by the policies of our governments.

We had the chance to visit with the students from the Pyongyang Architecture and Planning University. Many of the students spoke fluent English and they were incredibly bright and sharp. I have no doubt that they selected the best and the brightest to interact with us (as we do here in the United States, South Korea, and elsewhere). I remember one young woman, 23, who was studying architecture but also loved studying poetry and literature. She was so lovely, humble and gracious. We had the chance to have small group discussions and during our talk, one of my DEEP colleagues and I brought up the idea of creating a transnational campaign called "De-Mine the DMZ" to dismantle the 1.2 million land mines strewn across the DMZ. They loved the idea and said we must work towards making this happen.

It's not that I don't think that non-Koreans don't have the access that we do—I'm sure they do. Look at Selig Harrison who has been to North Korean umpteen times and has spoken directly with some of the DPRK's top officials. But that's not what we were there to do. We were there to connect with the people and as much as possible the youth of North Korea so that we can work together to build a permanent peace on the Korean peninsula and a reunification from the ground up.

That is a goal that many Koreans would support. I'll return to this theme in a bit. But for now, I'd like to ask you about Pyongyang. I assume that you spent the bulk of your time in the capital. Tell us something about what you saw there. In particular, as this was your third trip to North Korea, I'm interested in what changes you've seen over time.

[Ahn] Yes, we stayed at the Haebangsan Hotel in Pyongyang. I had previously stayed at the Koryo Hotel (the country's best) and the Bottongang (alongside the Bottong River), but this one seemed centrally located.

As most of our days were filled with a jam-packed itinerary, it's hard to capture what I saw, as so much of what we saw were monuments, museums and major buildings–but I'll do my best to recall my quickly fading memory.

I saw a relatively modern, industrialized city that lacked things that we see in most major cities around the world: cars, neon lights, and advertisements. Certainly there were cars and trucks, but for the most part the people of Pyongyang were walking and biking. Instead of ads featuring scantily clad women selling alcohol, fashion or cars, there were beautifully painted political posters throughout the city. Since they were in Korean and my Korean is not that advanced, there are some words I couldn't interpret (especially as we sped by in our bus). There were some unforgettable posters. One is of a Korean man knocking out two Western-looking Uncle Sams wrapped in red, white and blue. I can't recall the exact words, but it went something like, "Kick out the Americans and let's reunify on our own terms!"

Every morning several of us went jogging along the Tedong River. The trails were beautifully manicured, with no litter on the paths, and there was a serenity and calm to the city. We would run past people wearing modern, professional looking clothes. They didn't look any different than Koreans in the south, except of course lacking the wild fashion and racy attire that younger people are now wearing there. In order to cross streets, we would walk downstairs and cross an underground passage that was dimly lit. It took a moment for your eyes to adjust to the dark, but the North Koreans were hardly phased. Bikes and masses of people passed each other with very little collision. It was pretty remarkable. Actually, these runs were some of my favorite moments in Pyongyang and actually made me fall in love with the city. There was a timeless, surreal feel about the city that was created by thick air from the humidity, the river lined with weeping willows, and the absence of a cacophony of cars. As my colleague so eloquently put it, "There's nothing like an energy crisis to quiet a city." Of course as visitors it's easy to appreciate the lack of cars or neon lights, but I have no doubt that the Koreans would wish that they could have access to consistent energy like the rest of the world.

We visited several monuments and museums, such as the Juche Tower and the Revolutionary Martyr's Cemetery, as well as popular destinations in Pyongyang such as the Okryukwa noodle house where we enjoyed a delicious bowl of nangmyun (noodles). We visited the maternity hospital in Pyongyang, which was quite impressive. They had very modern technology, very clean facilities, and what appeared to be a very organized and holistic system that enabled new mothers to heal and rest for several days following delivery. We also got to ride the famous Pyongyang subway. The stations were meticulously maintained, with ornately designed mosaic murals made with ceramic tiles.

As we drove through the city, I do recall quite vividly our North Korean guides pointing to one restaurant, whose name evades my memory. They excitedly pointed out that that was the oldest restaurant in Pyongyang that had survived the bombs from the Korean War. As I look back on my time there, I realize why history is so important to North Koreans. History is so important because it explains why they chose the society that they chose to build and because there is virtually very little that remains from the past since so much of what existed had been destroyed before the Japanese fled at the end of WWII and during the Korean War. For example, when you go and visit the museums in North Korea, many of the items on display are replicas of artifacts. In fact, there are virtually few pieces of celadon pottery on display, whereas you can see celadon in museums in Asian Art museums in the United States, in South Korea and Japan. But it hardly exists in North Korea, probably because most of it was taken by the Japanese during the occupation and by wealthy Koreans who fled south, while what remained was destroyed during the war.

And so that's what you see in North Korea. A society that they had largely built by themselves after being completely destroyed during the Korean War.

We'll never know the extent of artistic riches that were lost. I was aware of the removal of artwork during the period of Japanese colonial rule. But I hadn't really dwelled on the thought that one of the results of the war, when U.S. bombers obliterated every town and city in North Korea, would be the destruction of most of what remained of the region's artistic legacy. You were there at an interesting historical moment, when there seemed to be real progress on the nuclear agreement and the prospect of better relations. What did your hosts have to say about the nuclear agreement and U.S.-DPRK relations? How did they perceive the future? And finally, you've mentioned that DEEP intends to play a direct role in improving relations and building reunification. Perhaps it's a bit unfair to ask this so soon after your trip, but are there plans in place for new activities by DEEP? What directions would you like to see the organization take?

[Ahn] As much as I wished that the North Koreans had a more upbeat response when I asked them what they thought about the potential lifting of sanctions once the 40 days passed, they didn't. Their typical response was, "We will just wait and see. We never pin much hope on the United States, especially the Bush administration. We fulfilled our end of the deal and all we can hope is that the United States keeps their promise."

During the ride back from Kaesong, I spoke at length with one of our guides. He gave a very thorough analysis of the nuclear "crisis," tying together the collapse of the socialist trading bloc, North Korea's need for energy in the absence of imported subsidized oil from the former Soviet Union (and therefore pursuit of nuclear energy), and the food crisis. He knew well that the Clinton administration never intended to build the light-water reactors–or if they did they were constrained by the Republican hawks who took over Congress–and that when the clock was running out to fulfill the U.S.' end of the agreement, the Bush administration needed some way out. Hence the birth of the nuclear crisis.

But I do think that they are somewhat hopeful about the change in direction that an Obama presidency could bring to North Korea and the rest of the world. Like the rest of us, they see how dangerous the Bush administration is and has been to global peace and security.

As for DEEP, I can only speak for the work that I am involved with right now outside of the program. DEEP is a program out of New York's community-based Nodutdol for Korean Community Development, and I know that they will continue to run the DEEP program as long as it's needed. But as a fellow with the Korea Policy Institute, we are organizing a conference with UC Berkeley's International and Area Studies Program called "Reunification: Building Permanent Peace in Korea."

The conference is intended to generate pragmatic U.S. policy options toward the Korean peninsula in the post-Bush administration era. Our focus is on building an enduring peace between the U.S. and North Korea that leads to the eventual unification of the Koreas. While our focus is on Korean unification and U.S. policy toward Korea, we realize that analysis of the Korean situation requires contextualization within a larger geopolitical framework that involves regional actors, governments, and peoples. There are multipolar and transnational politics that influence Korea. And so we are hoping to examine how U.S. strategic interests in Northeast Asia influence its policy positions toward the Koreas—that is to say, how the global shift of economic and military dominance from the western to the eastern hemisphere influences U.S. policy toward Korea. We've managed to bring together some of the leading historians and policy experts on Korea, including Bruce Cumings and Selig Harrison, so it should bear some rich discussion and insight to help shape a new U.S. Korea policy.

Another area that I am working to support is the transition to sustainable agriculture in North Korea. I am specifically working with a seed scientist named Dr. Pilju Kim Joo who has been working with several cooperative farms since 1987. She is doing her best to help these farms stabilize following the devastating collapse of North Korea's economy and agricultural production system, and she realizes that North Korea's future lies in its ability to transition to more ecologically sustainable farming practices. So I am trying to help raise some funds to bring some of the farm managers, agricultural scientists and officials from the Ministry of Agriculture to take a tour of the larger-scale organic farms, especially those specializing in organic rice and cotton production. But it will take a long time for the North Koreans to reduce their dependency on the inputs that make farming expensive: pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and fuel–largely because they have been practicing this form of industrialized agriculture as far back as when the Japanese first introduced green revolution agriculture into Korea. But all of this will take some resources, so I'm hoping that some visionary philanthropist will be able to see the potential of such educational exchanges.

And finally, it's still a twinkle in my eye, but I've been conspiring with a colleague of mine, Dr. Christine Hong, to spark a transnational campaign called "De-Mine the DMZ." As I've said over and over in this interview, we need a reunification that is not just led by corporations or the governments–but one that is led by the people and from the ground up. And it needs to be tangible and the first way to help Koreans travel freely from the south to north and from Pyongyang to Seoul is to remove the 1.2 million land-mines that are waiting to explode. We must not wait 20 years; we must do it today.

Christine Ahn is a policy analyst who writes and speaks frequently on hunger, trade and globalization, and Korea. She co-founded the Korea Policy Institute and Korean Americans for Fair Trade, and is the editor of Shafted: Free Trade and America's Working Poor and a contributor to the award-winning book The Revolution Will Not be Funded.

To make a contribution to the program to assist sustainable agriculture in North Korea, send a tax-deductible check to Pilju Kim Joo, at 16005 22nd Ave. N, Plymouth, MN 55447-2365. Write on the memo "sustainable agriculture exchange."

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