

## AIR KORYO

Our North Korean host spoke through dedicated earphones to our delegation of seven Americans as we left Beijing on a flight to Pyongyang, capital of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. "Welcome to Air Koryo. I will be your companion for your visit to the DPRK. The Great Leader, Eternal President Kim Il Sung, gave his all for aviation. Your 90-minute flight to the Capital will be enjoyable and safe. Do not believe the erroneous western reports that Air Koryo has the world's worst airline safety record. Our Ilyushin jet aircraft is as modern as any produced - by the former Soviet Union. If your country would lift sanctions against the DPRK, we could replace its engines with new ones from GE. I can assure you – these engines have been working well, so far.

This is the only time I can speak with you candidly, because once we land, everything we say will be on the record and shared. Everything is on the record and shared in the DPRK, for in my country the people rule. Because no tracing devices are allowed on the plane, in this brief time I can discreetly share some thoughts about our country, the DPRK. This will correct some misimpressions that foreigners seem to have about our land. A point of information - If you tell anyone I said any of this, I will deny it.

You probably know Pyongyang has the world's tallest hotel building - 100 stories high. This magnificent pyramidal structure known as the Ryugyong Hotel when opened will be the world's most modern hospitality palace. Eternal President Kim Il Sung gave his all for its creation. Unfortunately his all was not enough, nor was the all of his son, our late Dear Leader Kim Jong-il. The cornerstone was laid in 1987, and it is not open yet. I was giving Iranian

businessmen a tour of the Capital recently and mentioned the 1987 start of construction. Later I was called to account by our Friendship Society President. "You cannot tell guests that DPRK construction takes so long," he shouted at me. I learned my lesson. On the next tour, as our Toyota van drove by the structure, finished as it is on the outside, I said nothing until a guest gawked at the Pyramid and asked, "What is that?" I replied, "I don't know. It wasn't there yesterday." Esquire magazine dubbed the Ryugyong Hotel the worst building in the history of the world, but just wait until it opens. I'm reserving judgment.

And now while you watch the feature film shown on every flight into Pyongyang of our Eternal President vanquishing the Japanese occupiers in 1945 and 8 years later evicting the US Army from our country, let me offer some insights into the DPRK. Let's start with the fact that the USA and the DPRK have a lot in common.

We are both exceptional. "American exceptionalism" is a mantra of your politicians. "A City on a Hill" your European settlers claimed the new world to be, as it was echoed by Ronald Reagan. "The last best hope of earth," Abraham Lincoln called it. You express your exceptionalism through a military budget that is 42%, close to half, of total world military spending, with power to destroy life on our planet in hours whenever your President wishes.

We understand and respect that. And we are doing our best to catch up to you despite our meager resources. Our country is founded on the principle of Exceptionalism. We call it Juche, in English "self-reliance." Juche is our ideology, enshrined in our Constitution. Juche resounds through our textbooks. Juche is the basis of all instruction. It is memorized and recited by our work units. Here's a passage from the Great Leader – Juche "is the movement of

the popular masses to free themselves from all sorts of subordination and restrictions and live and develop independently as the master of the world and their destiny.” We are all free, declares Juche. The Marlboro man would be comfortable with Juche, at least in its starting point. Perhaps some members of your Tea Party have studied Juche?

For the DPRK, there is no choice but to rely only on ourselves, both individually and as a country. We are a country with no allies and no friends. We embrace your George Washington's admonition to have no permanent alliances with any nation, to rely on no other country for protection and safety. And so we have developed our own nuclear weapons, crude as they are. You must congratulate us on this success - the poorest country in history to join the nuclear club. We draft our young men at age 18 for 5-20 years, except for those who must hold more important positions like that of Supreme Leader or professor or doctor or professional basketball player. We have per capita the world's largest standing Army, fourth largest in the world in number. You and we have different histories of who started the Korean War, but it is a fact that your Army invaded our land, demolished Pyongyang and chased the Great Leader to the Chinese border. Your airplanes dropped more bombs on the DPRK during the Korean War than all the aerial bombs dropped on Europe in World War II. You left us with no choice but to prepare for the next invasion. You may find that bellicose, but it is a compliment to you. Like you, we must be exceptional to survive. We cannot make the mistake of Qaddafi or Saddam Hussein in surrendering a nuclear program in exchange for a loose hope of being treated with warmth and respect.

A second great similarity between us: Neither of us likes China, but we both find it

useful. We can acknowledge China as a great power, perhaps not an enemy but never an ally. For over two thousand years China has tried to dominate Korea, to conquer and subjugate us, to eradicate our culture and language. Were it not for the Japanese who ravaged and ruled our country from 1907 to 1945 followed by the USA in the early 1950's, China would remain our singular mortal foe. We and you are both flooded with Chinese goods, and we both find it useful to have the Chinese make things of decent quality at a reasonable price, while they suffer the pollution and human costs that come with that. We both borrow a lot from China, with the difference that we don't intend to repay our loans, whereas you seem to think you should repay yours. China buys your debt. We are more clever about it. China gives us money and a billion dollars a year of food, for fear a collapse of our system would destabilize its northern provinces, where millions of Koreans reside. We use weakness as our strength. But it is only a matter of tactics where we differ. Neither of us wants to be China's servant.

A third great similarity of our nations - we both miss the Soviet Union, even though we celebrate its disappearance. For you, the USSR's evaporation robbed you of a mesmerizing enemy. Without it, you have trouble defining yourself. Its absence makes it harder to sustain your military-industrial complex and for your politicians to justify federal programs, starting with the interstate highway system that President Eisenhower claimed was essential to move tanks and troops across the country. For us, the end of the USSR caused a total collapse of our economy. Ripped from the moorings of Soviet trade and support, we were left without an easy credit trading partner – destitute. We suffered runaway inflation, an end to no-repay loans, and famine. At least this freed us from the need to pay homage to the western maxims of Marx and Lenin. We erased all references to communism from our Constitution. We are now free to

be purely Korean, to embrace Juche fully. For you, the end of the USSR meant the end of history, or so you thought. But with triumph came collective angst. We both struggle to find our footing in a world without the Soviet Union. Perhaps Al Qaeda has rescued you and provided a new foe around which to rally your spirit. We have no such new troubles. Everyone is our enemy.

You and we boast incredible income disparities. The Great Successor, Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong-un, inherited eight palace complexes, complete with bowling allies, fountains and home theaters, beyond the dreams of any King of France or England. Our elite buy what they wish to meet their wants – even Campbell’s Soup, Mentos, Oreos and Ritz crackers. We would love to have a KFC here. Can you arrange it? But most of our people live about as they did a thousand years ago. Most of our farmers live on \$1 a day. The best paid workers in our 3 Special Economic Zones do better. They make about \$50 – a month. You have recently beefed up your poverty statistics, with the percentage of USA residents living in poverty rising to over 15% last year, and more than a quarter of your children growing up in poverty. Your top 1% own 35% of America’s total wealth. Your top 20% own 85% of American wealth. We are comfortable with that, though the vast majority of our country’s wealth belongs to the nation rather than any individual. None of our elite, except the Great Successor, enjoys a standard of living anything like that of your average hedge fund manager. Juche lets our people fend for themselves, leaving their poverty a matter of their own creation. Surely that resonates with a lot of your voters.

We both do a superlative job of filling prisons. The USA has the highest incarceration

rate in the world - 730 prisoners per 100,000 population. Wikipedia doesn't count the DPRK because we don't publish statistics about anything. You won't hear about this while you are in the DPRK, but if you count the residents of our gulags (we call them labor camps), we are ahead of you in per capita prison population. Together we come out on top. And we both remain in the narrow band of nations that employ the death penalty to deal with our most problematic miscreants.

Now, there are some differences. As I mentioned, we have a draft. Service to the motherland is everyone's obligation, whereas you shed this primitive notion and hire native mercenaries and use drones to advance your military objectives.

We have a dynastic system, superior because it is more orderly than yours. Two-party democracy, let us be frank, does not seem to be working very well these days. Our governance by hereditary genius gives us a stability even greater than that of China. If only we could figure out how to grow 10% a year for 30 years, as China did. At least we don't have to argue about raising our debt ceiling to pay bills already due and owing. When we are pinched for hard currency, we print it. Our state-of-the-art counterfeiting technology enables us to print suitcases full of Ben Franklins that your Mint describes as perfect copies.

Our calendars differ. As we have now entered DPRK air space, welcome to the year 101. Year one equates to your calendar year 1912, the year the Great Leader was born. You may know that his father was a Presbyterian elder, educated at a Christian school started by American missionaries, and his mother was a devout Christian. The Great Leader was born on April 15, 2012. We celebrate the same day you have to pay your taxes.

Unlike your government, ours can turn on a won, or as you would say, “turn on a dime.” Here’s an example of what I mean. Until last spring, women in the DPRK dressed in drab - green, gray, black, brown. Our First Lady, 27 years old, is a fashionista. She loves color and flash. And so this summer she signaled that it was acceptable for our women to wear pink, red, sequins, gold, silver. You will witness a rainbow of fashion among our women, at least for those within the capital.

Here’s another example. Our Dear General has just extended the benefits of Juche for our farmers. They may now keep 30% of their crops. Previously they had to meet a quota and could keep whatever was left, which was often nothing. This overnight change will launch a market in excess crops and reduce prospects of famine in the countryside. You do it differently. You tax real property, even unproductive land, and you tax income. The DPRK has no income or property tax. We are a tax haven.

Of course, sometimes our instant changes from on high don’t work out as planned. In 1996, the Dear Leader devised a way to combat famine. Only 12% of our land is arable. Goats were the Dear Leader’s brilliantly conceived answer to feeding the people. Goats produce milk and cheese and can graze on our rocky hillsides. Within two years of the Dear Leader’s dictate that goats multiply, we tripled our goat population. Unfortunately, the marauding goats denuded our hillsides, and there ensued monsoons and mudslides that washed away most of our plantable land. This caused greater food scarcity than before the goat explosion. Our Dear Leader gave his all for goats, but they did not reciprocate.

You and we have different farm policies. Juche means self-reliance, and we mean it. No

one will rescue you in the countryside. Government leaves you alone after you satisfy the needs of the Pyongyang elite, and as long as you behave. You must rely on yourself. You make it or you starve. As we travel together from the airport to your hotel, you will see military trucks returning from the farms loaded with kim chi, with cheery work crews of 20-30 men and women sitting atop the leafy harvest piled high on truck beds as they deliver it to the capital. Our harvesters are free, once they deliver what the capital demands, to gather what they can to sustain their families. We have no crop support programs as your second Roosevelt devised. We don't pay people not to grow crops. Ayn Rand would be impressed by the freedom of our farmers. Famine is simply one side of the coin of freedom.

You must be begging me to tell you more about Juche, the ideology of our nation. The basic principle of the Juche idea is that man is the master of everything and decides everything. Man is independent. Man does not resign himself to the restrictions of nature and social subjugation but opposes them. Man acts as a social being, and so needs a leader and a strong army to prevent foreigners and internal traitors from disturbing the practice of self-reliance. Korea can rely on no other nation for its survival and greatness. We must depend only on ourselves. That's Juche for Dummies. At its heart Juche is a libertarian idea, protected by an army and government led by a great leader who sets our course, keeping us free from outside domination and free to be self-reliant. We have a saying – “when one has a weak fist, he is compelled to wipe away tears with it.” With no friends, we are left compelled to be a self-reliant nation, a country of Juche. Without military strength, there can be no independence in politics, no self-sustenance in the economy, and we would become disgraced slaves of the oppressors, as we were for centuries under Chinese, Japanese and Russian rule. We will not be



conquered again. That insistence on our national independence is perhaps our greatest similarity with the USA. Shall we join in a mutual Juche society?

As we prepare to land, a friendly reminder. You may not bring computers, cell phones or any device with GPS capability into the country. If you brought one with you, check it with the Customs officer and retrieve it when you return to Beijing.

We will land at one of the most convenient airports in the world. We have only one regular flight a day, and you are on it. So you will not experience the trauma of great distance between gates or delays in getting your luggage. We have no gates, and your luggage will be tenderly guarded, screened and delivered to you soon. Enjoy your stay in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea!

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That early November morning I awoke in our pink Pyongyang hotel. My window overlooked the adjacent 8-story Unification Church building of the late Rev. Moon, famous for marrying hundreds of couples in single ceremonies. Our hotel lobby was graced with a giant mural of the Great Leader and his son the Dear Leader smiling atop Mount Paektu. I shook off my strange dream of an impossibly frank talk by our Korea Friendship Society minder as I prepared for our first day of meetings in North Korea.

Five days later our USA delegation departed the DPRK. What did I make of the world's most secretive society, the poorest country to possess nuclear weapons and launch a satellite into space, the northern part of a divided Korea formally at war with itself? How can we think

about this place, these people, this leadership, this system, this Juche?

History is a starting point, as a lens to filter preconception from reality. The name Korea derives from the ancient Kingdom of Koguryo. This was the dominant of three kingdoms that once ruled the Korean peninsula north into Manchuria from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE through the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century CE. In the fifth century, Koguryo established its capital at the seat of the former Chinese Han Dynasty commandery – Pyongyang. Until the two lesser kingdoms conspired with China to defeat Koguryo, it was the most powerful Korean dynasty to rule most of modern day Korea without foreign domination.

Korea has been invaded 900 times in the past 2,000 years. Korean schoolchildren learn the glorious triumph of Koguryo against the Chinese, who in the sixth and seventh centuries invaded with the aim of appending Korea to the Chinese empire. In 598 CE, the Sui dynasty sent an army of 300,000 to conquer Koguryo. Bad weather resulted in disaster, and the massive force failed to reach the Korean peninsula. This natural salvation for Koguryo was a mere overture to the events of 612. That year a Chinese force of 1,133,800 soldiers marched on Koguryo – six divisions of armed men stretching over 30 miles. The Chinese crossed the Liao River and entered the Koguryo controlled part of Manchuria, suffering heavy losses in skirmishes with the Koguryo forces. As the Chinese reached Pyongyang and penetrated the outer walls of the capital, a Koguryo commander strode forth to sue for peace. Ulch Mundok became one of Korea's legendary and heroic figures – not for surrendering to China, but instead for getting the Chinese to mistake a pledge of surrender for what was truly in store. As the Sui army retreated north back towards China, clutching a victory by surrender on paper, the

Koguryo army launched a series of attacks that decimated the Chinese ranks. By the time it ended, only 2700 of the original million plus returned to Chinese territory. Vastly more monumental in numbers than Napoleon's disastrous trek out of Russia, this triumph reigns as a crowning achievement of Korean military history.

Apply this history to today, and what can we conclude?

First, Korea has always had a fear, respect and hatred for China. It wants Chinese respect, as a more ancient, more powerful Asian neighbor. But Korea insists on its independence.

Second, there is power in duplicity, and in great weakness lies overpowering strength. Like a boxer who bobs and weaves before a stronger foe, Korea marshals the power of native defense and practices self-reliance by wit and deceit.

Third, forever be on guard against invasion by foreign forces, or Korean civilization could be wiped from the earth.

This undergirds the ideology of Juche and explains why the DPRK spends vast sums on nuclear weapons and missiles while the average income of its people slipped below US\$1,000 in the past 20 years.

Since the dawn of the nuclear age, the entry requirement for the world's most exclusive club is possession of nuclear weapons. All nine nations with nuclear weapons merit respect, if not admiration. India and Pakistan proved that breaking the rules of nonproliferation resulted in temporary but minor trade sanctions, followed by acquiescence and greater international

stature.

North Korea benefits enormously from membership in Club Nuclear. It uses nuclear talks to obtain multi-billion dollar quantities of aid and promises of more to come, by merely committing to certain drawbacks from further tests or armaments, and then after obtaining the benefits, plunges ahead with further tests and missile launches. If it lacks attention in the form of financial and other support from South Korea, China or the rest of the world, it strafes a South Korean controlled island lying further north than the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Or it attacks a South Korean naval ship straying close to its territorial waters. Or not so long ago, it took over a small US Naval vessel, the Pueblo, which is now a museum along Pyongyang's main river. None of these provocations is enough to start a war, but each is a reminder that the DPRK wants attention from its neighbors and the USA. And each is a clanging symbol of its effort to project resolve and strength so as not to be forgotten and forsaken by those with the ability to send it food and aid. The DPRK is a beggar with weapons – of a kind hard to ignore.

The United States and the United Nations, including China, Russia, Japan and South Korea, have tried to bribe North Korea into disarming and renouncing nuclear weaponry. In exchange, nations offer nuclear power plants, food and normalized membership in the family of nations. But if you were the leader of North Korea, you would see this as a false bargain. Nuclear is your trump card, embraces Koguryo history, and maintains the Kim monarchy.

And a monarchy it is. North Korea is a hereditary kingdom, built on the ideology of Juche. It is not modeled after Marxist-Leninist communism. It is more like an ancient Chinese or Korean dynasty. The stature of the Great Leader, followed by the Dear Leader, and

transmitted a year ago to the Great Successor, is authentically felt in the population, inculcated from birth, with severe punishment for those who fail to dust home portraits of the Eternal President and his son. Striking proof of this comes from North Korean defectors living in South Korea. Despite the fact they defected, 9 of 10 defectors call themselves North Koreans, and 75% tell pollsters they have affection for Kim Il-sung, his son and grandson. Such is the spell cast by monarchy. It is not the king who is responsible for famine or wretched living conditions, but a failure of the population to live up to his call for service to the motherland or the result of scheming enemy agents and internal conspirators. The king gives his all for the country, but sinister foreign and traitorous elements aim to dethrone him and attack his beloved people. The masses must rise up to achieve what the Great Leader demands of them. He is their father, and the nation is their mother.

You can think of North Korea as the Kingdom of Oz, with Pyongyang the emerald city, Juche the Magic and Kim Jong-un the third hereditary wizard behind a kim chi curtain. The wizard occasionally appears in public to inspect a hospital or bless a new monument or give a talk at Kim Il Sung Square, where a million people stand at attention. The Great Successor's stirring first lecture had as its title – "Let us march forward dynamically towards final victory, holding higher the banner of Songun!" Only monarchy can explain this.

We make fun, as did the online news journal The Onion, when it declared Kim Jong-un the World's Sexiest Man for 2012. It announced:

With his devastatingly handsome, round face, his boyish charm, and his strong, sturdy frame, this Pyongyang-bred heartthrob is every woman's dream come true. Blessed with an air of power that masks an unmistakable cute, cuddly side, Kim made this newspaper's

editorial board swoon with his impeccable fashion sense, chic short hairstyle, and, of course, that famous smile.

The story was reported as true by China's The People's Daily, much to the chortling glee of westerners. But the reign of Kim Jong-un, his Grandfather and Father is no joke. It is reinforced as a dynasty as forcefully and thoroughly as the personality cults of Stalin and Mao sustained them for their lifetimes. There are no marketing billboards in Pyongyang, as advertising is illegal. But there are enormous billboards and placards across the fronts of apartment buildings with photographs of the Great Leader and the Dear Leader. The cult of the Kim dynasty has an hypnotic hold on the population – for so long as red lettered slogans emblazoned on postings throughout Pyongyang proclaim – “We have nothing to envy!”

Without a comparison, there is no envy. The elite of Pyongyang know they have nothing to envy compared to the country's farmers or the women who earn \$50 a month working six day weeks in the DRPK's special economic zones. The people of the DPRK are cut off from the outside world. Unable to travel, with internet available only to a trusted few, with no ability to know what life is like outside – even in Seoul, South Korea, less than 100 miles from Pyongyang, 99% of the North Korean population has no reason to think life could be better than it is.

The outside world's response to the DPRK has been to isolate and threaten it. United Nations sanctions block North Korea from a flow of global commerce. Severe travel restrictions by both the DPRK and other nations prevent North Koreans from traveling abroad. There is no flow of people and ideas that would over time serve as change agents, revealing that perhaps the DPRK has something to envy. This reaction of the outside world, this boycott, effectively reinforces what Pyongyang aims to achieve – continuing isolation of its people from foreign

influence.

Beyond history, monarchy and Juche, we must comprehend the DPRK as half a country, part of a divided Korea. Both North and South Korea are committed to reunification, by signed agreement and abiding aspiration. There is an obvious parallel here - Vietnam. Both Vietnam and Korea were divided by the Cold War immediately after Japan's defeat. Both were separated into north and south, with leaders installed and supported by the great competing Cold War powers, not by free national election. Vietnam's reunification came only when outside forces withdrew from a national conflict that was never at its root about Soviet communism or western capitalism.

Korea preceded Vietnam as the first hot conflict of the Cold War. The world remains haunted by the Korean War, which ended in a draw, leaving north-south boundaries virtually as they were before 1950, with 4 million dead, the first war that the United States chose to enter but failed to win. 33,692 American combat deaths pale in number to the 800,000 lost by the People's Republic of China, or to the 2-3 million Koreans who died.

And after it ended, with the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel landscaped by a 4 kilometer wide DMZ, for almost 20 years North Korea was winning the economic race. In 1971 North Korea was the most intensively industrialized country in Asia except for Japan, by many accounts. North Korea then enjoyed more energy consumption than South Korea, and its per capita income was higher. Today, by contrast, South Korea uses 6 times the energy as the North. At night, the stars are dim in Seoul, but you can see the Milky Way glowing above Pyongyang. North Korea's average per capita income has dropped over 20 years - from \$1,160 in 1990 to about \$960

today, while South Korea's exceeds \$30,000.

Because of this, the reunification of Korea will be the opposite of what happened in Vietnam. For Korea, the South is virtually certain to prevail when unification occurs. With the 15<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world and a population twice that of the North, South Korea one day will subsume the North, as West Germany acquired East Germany rather than the other way around. This is as certain a bet as exists in international politics. The questions are really when and on what terms will the South absorb the North.

South Koreans pray that reunification not come too soon. Absorbing the DPRK into South Korea today would pose a crushing burden on the South. The difference in living standards, the amount of deferred maintenance and costs of reconfiguring virtually all aspects of northern society pose a crippling challenge to even the most avid nation builder. West Germany had an economy about ten times that of the East in 1989. The comparable factor between North and South Korea is 32. The absorption cost of the North by the South, were the DPRK to collapse today, is estimated in the trillions of dollars. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1998, following his historic meeting with Kim Jong-il, former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung said that unification will occur "when both sides feel comfortable enough in becoming one again, no matter how long it takes." This means, in Korean terms, a very long time from now.

In the interim, US foreign policy has turned from the Cold War to the Cold Shoulder. Bribes have not worked. Sanctions only drive North Korea further into its self-isolation, ironically furthering the principles of Juche. The DPRK has been able to sustain its elite and



develop nuclear and missile technology that deter anyone from testing its resolve. The warning time between launch of an offensive weapon from the DPRK and its destroying Seoul is 45 seconds. The DPRK has turned itself into a scorpion – who would dare approach its stinger? And so we give it a cold shoulder rather than put serious hopes into a ritual of talks, with no realistic chance that North Korea will surrender its trump card. Reunification awaits as a distant turning point.

Of course, the monarchy, the wizard, will need to step from behind the curtain in the Kingdom of Oz and relinquish control for unification to occur. History offers no ready example of an orderly transition of this type. How might it occur?

One possibility arises from the end of the Kingdom of Koguryo. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a General killed the King and took control, only to be defeated within a decade by the combined forces of two other Korean kingdoms and the might of the Chinese empire. Once monarchy was eliminated and no ideology was left to sustain the coup leader, the end followed quickly. Perhaps this will be the fate of the Kim dynasty, and then of the military leader who dares to risk a bloody takeover.

A second possibility rests on the power of ideas – influence – the capacity or power of persons or things to be a compelling force. The word Influence derives from Latin for “flowing in.” When North Koreans see there is something to envy, that life can be better, they will feel and over time embrace the need to change their system. This is a lesson repeated throughout history, most recently from what is called the Arab Spring. It was only when living standards were improving, when information flow, the internet and travel combined to show populations

how others lived, that popular uprisings overturned long-lasting dictatorships. North Korea may be far from an Arab springtime. It is the depths of winter in the DPRK, but no season lasts forever.

And what will bring springtime to the DPRK? One thing I know for sure from my visit to Pyongyang. It will not come from its continuing isolation from the world or from continued deprivation of the North Korean people. Change will occur when the people of the DPRK see what life is like beyond the kim chi curtain, that in fact they do have much to envy. It is the influence of affluence and a freer flow of ideas and people that will one day pave the way for Korean unification and a better life for the people of North Korea. It can be argued that rather than forcing and reinforcing the DPRK's isolation from the world, we should be reaching out to its people in every way possible. Maybe we should fly the entire country to Disney World.

The Olympic Committee is doing its part. In 2016, golf becomes an Olympic sport. One of my fellow delegates runs the Jack Nicklaus course in Beijing. We met with the Minister of Sport and visited the country's only golf course, where the Great Leader is said to have shot an incredible round. I'll give a souvenir scorecard for the Pyongyang Golfjang to the first person to name the Great Leader's officially reported score. With the aim of Olympic golf gold in mind, the DPRK wants golf instructors and a driving range, some day a Jack Nicklaus course of its own. Could golf become a revolutionary force that brings springtime to North Korea?

Aside from golf, smuggling and bribery may help to unclench the fist of the Kim dynasty over time. This is Juche as Kim Il Sung did not envision it, or perhaps it is an odd echo of his Presbyterian upbringing. An innate entrepreneurial spirit has inspired a growing band of risk

takers to smuggle goods across the Chinese border, products banned by international sanctions. These brave souls bribe the Army patrols on the DPRK side and so expand an illicit form of creeping capitalism that is trickling up within the system. Corruption and bribery in the DPRK are forces we might celebrate rather than condemn, as they are the start of an emergent wealthy class that does not owe its success to the dynasty and will not be pleased if the Government tries to take its wealth away.

At the same time, the Great Successor's regime has approved tentative measures that are making cash more powerful within the DPRK than membership in the Korean Workers Party. Our delegation dined at pizza and fast food restaurants in Pyongyang that were private joint ventures with Italian entrepreneurs. Shops offering Jack Daniels and Camel cigarettes for won or dollars or Euros represent a supply chain where a number of individuals are amassing private wealth. Private street kiosks reminiscent of the "cooperativs" of the late Soviet Union are sprouting up like snow drops in February. Whether crocus, daffodils and tulips come next will be the surest sign of a North Korean spring.

Air travel lifts one out of the every day. It frees the mind and induces a nap. On our 90-minute flight from Pyongyang back to Beijing, my mind drifted. I thought how lucky I was to be born in Cincinnati, rather than in the Korean countryside below. As I began to doze rather than watch the patriotic film broadcast on Air Koryo screens about how the young Kim Il Sung vanquished the Japanese and several years later chased the American army out of the motherland, I pondered how none of us chooses our parents or our place of birth. We enter the world where chance decrees we first gulp the air. I was returning from the DPRK, this most

secretive place, grateful to live in a country we call politically dysfunctional, a place where we argue about everything and doubt that Congress can ever get its act together. The reassuring words of Will Rogers floated by: “Our country runs in spite of government, not because of it.”

And I wondered before nodding off as we entered Chinese airspace, what is America’s ideology? What is our Juche? We have freedom. We debate its contours. Is it freedom from or freedom of or freedom to? Despite our differences, or perhaps because of them, at least we constitutionally embrace the freedoms put first in our nation’s Bill of Rights – freedom of speech and thought and association and faith. With no permanent creed to constrain us, we are ineffably free to reinvent ourselves.

As our Air Koryo jet headed to Beijing, I looked forward to returning to Cincinnati, to home, family, to a place where dogs are pets rather than dinner - home to my iPhone, the internet, Downton Abbey and Cspan - home to a place where on Monday nights, men read papers to one another in an historic brick building on East 4<sup>th</sup> Street, where if the magic is right, the listening ends at the same time as the words that are offered. So ends the reading.

For the Literary Club – February 11, 2013

Joseph J Dehner

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