

# The Socialist Modern at Rest and Play

## Spaces of Leisure in North Korea

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### Abstract

Conventionally conceived of as entirely lacking in frivolity or playfulness, its' citizens time and energy and its' geographic spaces harnessed only to the prerogatives of political and military production, North Korea is regarded as the 'terra nullis' of leisure activity. However in the light of the Korean peninsula's forceful encounter with Japanese Imperialist modernity, this paper examines connections between the introduction of sporting, leisurely and non-productive modes of production and relation at the behest of colonialism and North Korea's conception of a leisure fit for the socialist modern. Far from a blank leisure canvas, Pyongyang's political and cultural repertoire of praxis has required and supported an extensive network of narrative, ideology, infrastructure and facilities focused on politically appropriate sport, and entertainment which embedded and enmeshed leisure and non-productive time at the heart of Pyongyang's acutely charismatic and theatric political form.

**Keywords** #North Korea #Korean Peninsula #Socialist Leisure #Colonial Leisure #Sporting Diplomacy

### **Prefatory Note:**

Romanization strategies are considerably different between the two Korean nations. This paper generally encounters texts and documents generated within North Korea and therefore for ease of use and objectivity, the author has used the current North Korean Romanization in direct quotation from texts published in North Korea and uses the Romanization and for place names and events occurring with North Korea. There is one exception to this, for ease of use, the author utilises the South Korean approach to hyphenation of personal names, including those of North Korea's leadership whose names are normally un-hyphenated.

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"Our sportspeople undauntedly fought by our own style of tactics in the 17th Asian Games and world championships to exalt the honour of the country and greatly encourage the service personnel and people who were out in the struggle to defend socialism..." (Rodong Sinmun 2015)

Kim Jong-un's paeon to North Korea's women's football team following their victory over Japan at the 17<sup>th</sup> Asian Games in Incheon, South Korea appears within a New Years Message replete with assertions that seem some distance from what might be conceived of as sporting or leisurely. As 2015 began North Korea's Supreme Leader outlined a developmental agenda that appeared to have much in common with that of Socialist or Communist nations of the past. Calls to improve the efficiency of the People's Army, increase technological development and production capacity within fishing and stockbreeding sectors hark backwards earlier eras conceptualized elsewhere as those of inefficiency and drab austerity, a socialism of stasis and stagnation.

While North Korea as a nation rather contradictorily may be conceived of as not in the least bit stagnant, instead as threat, risk and danger (Becker 2005), a governmental, and philosophical outlier, characterized as Hazel Smith has put it as "sad, bad, or mad" (Smith 2000), Pyongyang's approach as well as its narrative output

places it in the popular imagination very much in this framework of austere socialism. North Korea's reigning regime has always been held to be one of the most autocratic political manifestations ever produced, at times considered to have absolutely no interest in its citizen's well-being (Green 2013) and determined to exist by extortion and coercion, a Soprano State (Chestnut 2005). It is in fact conceivable that sporting success such as that at the 17<sup>th</sup> Asian Games, could be entirely focused on the legitimation of the Kim family and the complex web of institutions which support them, forming a key part of the structure and processes of North Korean autocracy.

A close examination in the form of analysis of local discourse and the content of North Korean government output and historical narrative production however suggests there have always been elements to the discourse of local leisure and non-productive activity existing outside of the loop of militaristic, autocracy. This paper will investigate these elements, beginning with a review of the historical processes of sporting leisure and its inculcation into the Korean Peninsula through its colonization by Imperial Japan. It will then track the development of leisure, entertainment and sporting activity and its embedding within physical terrains and their interaction with North Korea's political form. This analysis of North Korea's cultural output and political narrative will bring the reader to the recent past, but not quite to the absolute present. In spite of the paper's author's experience of field work in North Korea, its contemporary leisure terrains are difficult to access or analyze in an empirical or objective manner, a common experience for the North Korean analyst. In conclusion therefore this paper having sought to encounter Pyongyang's particular, acute vision of Socialist modernity also narrates some of those methodological difficulties which in spite of North Korea's current relative openness beset and circumscribe our encounters with its population's lived experience of the terrains of play and leisure and entertainment.

### **Leisure under the Colonial master I**

The Korean Peninsula encountered 'modernity' during the Japanese colonial period. This included of course 'modernist' conceptions of leisure and leisure time. Korea's more ancient sporting forms are recounted by Gwang Ok as after diminishing under Confucian influence during the early Yi dynasty (beginning in 1392), been pri-

marily focused on developing the physical strength necessary for war fighting following the Hideyoshi invasions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During the colonial period community and traditional combat focused sport was “prohibited for fear that it might encourage the spirit of the warrior and belligerent attitudes...” (Gwang Ok 2007, 150). Japanese colonial authorities sought instead to reconfigure sporting culture according to Guttman’s (1978), secular, rational and standardised form. Chosen’s Government General instituted new curricula and programmes focused on the development of ‘modern’ forms of leisure, forms which even twenty years hence had been regarded with horror and confusion (Gwang Ok 2007).

Chosen made substantial, if unilateral and coerced progress in a very short historical period. Koen De Ceuster for example, recounts the 1936 Olympics at which Koreans, Son Kijong and Nam Sungjong were first and third in the Marathon competition respectively (De Ceuster 2003). Such athletic prowess and expertise suggests both the radical speed and impact of colonial Chosen’s leisure traditions and development. De Ceuster’s work considers the incorporation of sport and physical activity into Chosen’s educational strategies through the YMCA and its commitment to ‘muscular Christianity’ (De Ceuster 2003). In financial terms the Japanese economist Mitsuhiro Kimura, in an act of fiduciary archaeology within his reconstruction of economic developments during this era, asserts an astonishing 5.37 percent annual increase in spending on the leisure services and products (general inflation during this period was .97 percent annually) (Kimura 1993). We might of course consider Colonial era sport, whether instituted through the YMCA or its educational authorities as the route through which modernist visions of entertainment entered the Korean peninsula. David Rowe asserts that “sport in modernity is conventionally written as a process of cultural diffusion...with rationalized and regulated physical play either directly exported as part of the apparatus of imperialism and/or absorbed through the unfolding process of (post)colonialism,” (Rowe 2003) This assertion supports the conception of sporting leisure as one among a multitude of developmental fruits (some bitter) from this period. However as the reader will be aware, while physical pursuits may well have been a window into modernity for citizens of Chosen (or, later, of both Koreas), it is more difficult to make connection with the leisure narratives of the early North Korea

## **Building a Socialist Modernity** **Early North Korean Leisure Narrative**

While North Korea's early historical narrative revolves around Kim Il-sung's co-option of power, the development of its institutions and 'authentically' Socialist modes of governance on its territory it gives little space for activities normally understood as leisurely or entertaining and certainly not in ways that would be understood by the pre-1933 Chosen Government General. However due perhaps to the popular impetus described initially by Max Weber (Bendix 1977) and more recently by John Delury as "domain consensus" (Delury 2013), Kim Il-sung and the Korean Worker's Party having achieved power (Scalapino and Lee 1972) beyond simply undertaking the more regular tasks of asserting governmental, institutional and political authority, found it necessary to articulate the development of cultural spaces and production.

That is not to say such developments would be recognisable to those familiar with leisure framework's based on consumption. While one day artistic productions in North Korea might serve as entertainment, Kim Il-sung's "On Some Questions of Our Literature and Art" from 1951 asserts that "Our writers and artists are entrusted with very important tasks today when the Korean people are fighting a sacred war of liberation." These artists were then portrayed as "engineers of the human soul" who "should vividly represent in their works the lofty patriotism and staunch fighting spirit of our people and their unshakeable conviction of final victory." (Kim Il-sung 1951, 305) It seemed that leisure, entertainment and cultural output were all to be intricately connected to the needs of revolution and Party, to the building of a new Socialist polity and society

Given the urgency and intensity of this political connection and its content, practices of entertainment, of cultural commemoration, and of frivolity disconnected from these imperatives of revolution or liberation seem perhaps impossible or forbidden. However even at this early moment of North Korean cultural endeavor, activities which one day might be categorized as leisurely, are not only perceived as possible, but conceptualized through the lens of assertive revolutionary nationalism.

"Pansori lacks interest since it is too old-fashioned. The ballads of the southern provinces are what nobles would

chant over their wine cups in the days when they used to wear horse-hair hats and ride about on donkeys" (Kim Il-sung 1964, 389)

Before Pyongyang's institutions had developed a level of functionality capable of managing the challenges of elite sporting endeavor, Party and community groups were capable of organizing ideologically acceptable and popular or semi-leisurely musical events. Kim Il-sung's denunciation of "Pansori" songs makes strong connection with the political vision of leisure activity presented in 1961's "A Happy and Cheerful Life for the Working People." (Kim Il-sung 1961) Amateur singing and performance activities were rooted in Korean traditions (Park 2000), yet could be connected to the needs of Korean Workers Party politics. Kim Il-sung's "On Creating Revolutionary Literature and Art" outlines a musical and ideological repertoire for these productions and for more general popular consumption. Kim conceives of this musical milieu as being very much one of leisurely interaction and consumption, yet at the same time asserts that it must fit with the needs of ideology, revolution and unification:

"Writers and artists engaged in such fields as literature, the cinema, music and dance have a very great part to play in inspiring people with revolutionary spirit... our literature and art should serve not only socialist construction in the north, but also the struggle of the whole Korean people for the south Korean revolution and the unification of the fatherland." (Kim Il-sung 1964, 381)

### **Leisure, Charisma and the Cinema**

Having mastered some of the functionality required for the early arrangement of leisure spaces and infrastructures that would support live performance, Kim Il-sung's suggestion in the previous quotation moves the field of entertainment to the cinema. In spite however of the extraordinary edifices built elsewhere in the world for the production of film, Kim Il-sung conceives it as a form of leisure not restricted by site or complicated infrastructure. Cinema with a projector can be brought to people, citizens, and revolutionaries anywhere, so any space can be a place of ideological educa-

tion and leisure. Kim Il-sung in fact called the cinema “in many respects... superior to other forms of literature and art,” noting its site-based advantages.

“Plays or a chorus of 3000 people, for instance can be performed only on theatre stages.... Films, however can be screened anywhere, both in towns and villages, and can be shown simultaneously throughout the country.” (Kim Il-sung, 1966, 232).

This mobility and flexibility of conceptual or infrastructural form of course supported cinema’s co-option by Party and ideological interests. In part Pyongyang’s conception of the utility of its form and ease of use perhaps explains Kim Il-sung’s son and second leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-il’s later near obsession with film production (Armstrong, 2002) and the focus of wide national strategies towards the generation of greater, more artistic, more impactful, cinematic production (Kim, 2008).

While cinematic production, filmic output continued to be vital and key to Pyongyang’s leisure strategies and at times its diplomatic activities in the wider world (Armstrong, 2011) during the remainder of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as of interest to Kim Jong-il (Armstrong, 2002), Kim Il-sung offered little commitment or comment as to the generation of built leisure environments centered around film, leaving little tangible physical investment in infrastructure other than reconstruction of multi-use Party halls as Cinema houses (Berthelie, 2015).

While these revolutionary cultural forms may not immediately sound conventional in leisure terms, similar politics have produced similar ‘revolutionary’ outputs with which to occupy the leisure times and spaces of their citizenry. Artistic production on the socialist realist model in the USSR and the German Democratic Republic, for instance, resulted in the production of an enormous body of graphic and filmic work, meant not only to educate a politically conscious populace, but also to entertain (Dobrenko 2007). In somewhat more radical and perhaps less entertaining examples, theatric and performative self-criticism sessions were used to directly co-opt and occupy the leisure space and time of citizens of the People’s Republic of China during the Great Leap Forward (Vogel 1965) and

under the Khmer Rouge regime of the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea (Clayton 1988). While Kim Il-sung's approach was rigorous and denunciative, it was not as astringent as that of the Khmer Rouge and was willing grudgingly, to leave some cultural and leisure space that was not entirely sound in ideological terms: "There are quite a few crooning tunes amongst the songs composed by our people at the time of Japanese imperialist rule. Of course decadent crooning tunes are bad. But we can continue to sing those songs which are not degenerate but are fairly cheerful..." (Kim Il-sung 1964, 388.)

### **Returning to Physical Culture**

Moving beyond the musical, and the 'cheerful crooning songs' of the colonial era and focus on cinema, Kim Il-sung's speech of 1972 "On Developing Physical Culture" appeared instead to pine for the lost past of colonial sporting physical prowess demonstrated by Son Kijong in 1936. The speech outlined a future institutional agenda and imperative serving as the progenitor of future sporting events, such as the World Table Tennis Championships (1979) and the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students (1989), both held in Pyongyang. The World Festival of Youth and Students was part of a wide repertoire of sporting interactions between Socialist and Non-Aligned Movement nations, organised initially in Prague in 1947 by the World Federation of Democratic Youth (Burgoyne, 1969 and Kurbanov, 2015). These events serve to run counter to the sporting competitions and campaigns such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cup. Given this framework of possibility for politically appropriate physical activity, Kim Il-sung was not required to outline a leisure or leisurely space focused or connected to paradigms of consumption or frivolous entertainment; sport and physical culture could still very much to be harnessed to the needs of politics and ideology:

"In our conditions, we can develop physical culture on a mass basis without difficulty. In a capitalist society or in the south Korean society, only rich people can go in for sports for amusement, but under the socialists system in our country everyone is provided with conditions for taking part on physical culture." (Kim Il-sung 1972, 315)

In short what Kim Il-sung demanded was the creation of the first real sporting spaces North Korea, the first geographical spaces of leisure with a distinct focus. From this infrastructural imperative would spring both some of the more dramatic sporting infrastructure of modern Pyongyang (such as the 1st of May Stadium and the Yanggakdo Stadium) focused on the banks of the River Taedong. North Korea's sporting diplomacy using both football and basketball in recent years (Green 2013), would be impossible but for the resultant infrastructure and development. And as for the less savory, assertive ethno-nationalism of strength, blood and power outlined and asserted by B. R. Myers (Myers 2012), it, too, can be drawn into this 'Kimist' imperative to physical improvement.

However "On Developing Physical Culture" bridges another gap in developmental terms, between the era in which North Korean landscapes were almost entirely regenerated to serve production capacity, generation or risk needs, such as those within early field of hydrological improvement and more modern spaces such as Munsu Water Park, a connection from one era to the next.

The riverbanks of Pyongyang on which this infrastructure was built have long been part of North Korea's political narrative (Winstanley-Chesters, 2013). For instance, the Potong River Improvement Project of 1946 served as the foundational event for post-liberation hydrological development. Once neglected, the Taedong River was reconfigured by charismatic axes of power and architecture (Joinau 2014), into a participant in the topographic theatrics of modern Pyongyang. The river connects the demonstration space of Kim Il-sung Square to the ideological monolith of the Juché tower. However beyond asserting the political requirement that the citizenry perform theatrical and physical supplication to *Kimism* (Kwon and Chung 2012), the recent past saw the development further infrastructures of leisure, entertainment and physical activity on the banks of the Taedong.

As far back as 1997, at the end of the acute phase of the North Korean famine, social and temporal relations on the Taedong were being conceived of alternately. According to KCNA reports (KCNA 1997), this reconfiguration was due to Kim Jong-il's publication in September 1992 of the text "Let Us Improve City Management to Meet the Demand of the Developing Situation." In the light of Kim's theoretics the KCNA reported, "The past five years witnessed great

changes in the nation's city management." Intriguingly, while the text focuses primarily on technical issues of sewerage and water supply management, its author also notes that "streets and villages take on a new appearance... [and] boating sites have been built on the River Taedong and River Potong pleasure grounds." The following year, the urban architecture of the recently redeveloped Tongil Street was discussed by KCNA (KCNA 1998), including the fact that among the local attractions was "a 300-metre-wide promenade" that "stretches out to the riverside of the Taedong."

By the turn of the millennium, North Korea's narrative focused on the topography of the Taedong only paid momentary homage to either the foundational infrastructural events of 1946, or the sporting infrastructures of the 1980s, instead noting that: "Many people of all ages and both sexes are having a pleasant time on promenades and parks." This appeared an urban topography now unfamiliar to the urgent revolutionary narratives of previous years; a topography of pleasure rather than conflict. While the river bank still saw vestiges of contest, such as the hulk of the *USS Pueblo* and its commemoration of American defeat (Rodong Sinmun 2014), pleasure rather than violence would now be key to Pyongyang's contemporary urban planning.

## Conclusion

It is unclear if these changes to urban planning, design and amenity in the later years of Kim Jong-il's rule in North Korea's institutional mind were accompanied by changes in Pyongyang's philosophical approach to the delicate relationship between various modes of human existence; whether leisure had become a key goal of Kim Jong-il's conception of 'military first' or Songun politics (Vorontsov 2006). Just as in previous manifestations, North Korea's ideological structure and direction in the field seems light on conventional theoretical principles, but extremely dense and demonstrative in practical terms (Winstanley-Chesters 2014). Urban planning and the embedding of leisure practices in the socio-political everyday seemed to, while supporting more complex spaces of consumption for example those on Rungra Island (KCNA, 2003 and 2007) equally also enable the restructuring of developmental goals within Pyongyang's bureaucracy and elite. The era of creating "a strong and prosperous nation" (Koh 2006) towards the end of Kim Jong-il's

reign, in particular, matched these political and developmental goals to any expansion of leisure activity and space.

The space, practice and socio-political manifestation of leisure, entertainment and consumption in North Korea at the point of Kim Jong-il's death in late 2011 had of course come a vast conceptual distance from Son Kijong and his sporting endeavour (De Ceuster 2003) during the Japanese colonial period, from the immediate post-Liberation urgency of Kim Il-sung's pronouncements in 1951 and from Kim Jong-il's focus on revolutionary cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. While ridding social relations of frivolous intent, frippery and ephemeral practice is no longer a key goal of *Kimism* or any of Pyongyang's ideologic forms and the developments on the banks of the Taedong river around the turn of the millennium suggest a refocusing of efforts towards servicing pleasure and consumption, this paper at its conclusion cannot move as it had intended and had done in earlier forms, beyond the limits of its analysis of narratives and discourse focused on North Korea's leisure history and its spaces and terrains.

While the author of this article has himself walked upon the banks of the Taedong and seen the infrastructure at Rungra, so far as leisure and pleasure is concerned, moving beyond the bounds of reportage, impressionism or touristic gaze is empirically highly difficult. Valérie Gelézeau and others (Gelézeau, 2015, Campbell, 2014) and Winstanley-Chesters, 2013) have recently commented in academic publications on the difficulties of conventional fieldwork and data collection in North Korea. Gelézeau, for instance suggesting that in Pyongyang's sovereign space "...traditional fieldwork methods are impossible to implement" (Gelézeau, 2015, 2). Given North Korea's reluctance to allow unfettered access to its citizens by which a researcher might garner an objective notion or suggestion of their perception and experience of its sporting or entertainment infrastructure, or even their perception of the notion of leisurely or consumptive time, the researchers gaze on its leisure present will always be incomplete, subjective and in some sense voyeuristic. To experience those spaces of leisure produced by North Korea in 2015 and beyond perhaps researchers and analysts will need to develop their methodologies, to as Gelézeau urges, challenge "a positivist view of what fieldwork is, as something external to be discovered and interpreted" (Gelézeau, 2015, 2). For the moment, however this

paper will have to conclude with having simply given a view, a vista of North Korea's leisure past, deeply integrated with and constructed by its political narratives and cultural diffusions, a distinct product of its vision of the Socialist modern.

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