

# THE VALUE OF INFORMAL DIPLOMACY AND CULTURAL EXCHANGES IN THE DPRK

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## **Koryo Group**

Since 1993, Koryo Group has specialised in travel to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and in tourism and cultural exchanges with the country. The company has visited North Korea almost every month since 1993 and takes in around 70 per cent of all Western tourists to the country. In 2005, 700 tourists visited the DPRK with Koryo Group. It has been appointed as specialist advisor to the Korea International Travel Company, a DPRK government body, and has acted as consultant for the Lonely Planet guidebook and Bradt Travel Guide, which for the first time are opening the country to the wider world.

We believe that the tourist industry in North Korea should be encouraged. Tourism allows the Koreans to develop an understanding of the West, to train new guides and associated staff and to use English, all of which exposes the Koreans to the world outside and brings them into contact with Westerners, developments that otherwise might have been impossible. Tourism provides money brought in through legal channels. It requires the DPRK government to commit to a peaceful structure that interacts with the outside world. We have helped open up new areas and itineraries for tourists, which in turn improves contact with our Korean hosts. We push for local payment to provide finance directly to the local populace. Tourism has provided the access for several successful cultural exchanges—football friendship matches between amateur teams from Ireland, Holland and Hong Kong playing with North Korean teams, and school exchanges.

Working with the British film company VeryMuchSo Productions UK, Koryo Group has assisted in the production of two award-winning documentaries, *The Game of Their Lives* (2002), about the North Korean World Cup team of 1966, and *A State of Mind* (2004), which represented the first-ever access into family life in Pyongyang and the mass games. In 2004 and 2006, the company served as International Coordinator for the Pyongyang International Film Festival. With the support of the British Embassy in the DPRK and Ealing Studios, we have, amongst



Fig.1. A foreign visitor to the DPRK shares his snapshots

other films, screened *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Mr Bean*, *the Ultimate Disaster Movie* and *Bride and Prejudice* in Pyongyang. The films were seen by approximately 10,000 Koreans. We have also participated in music and travel programmes for British radio and television channels. A third documentary, *Crossing the Line*, that follows the life of Joe Dresnok, the last of the US military defectors still living in North Korea, had its world première in October 2006.

We believe cultural exchanges and informal diplomacy will have a significant impact in breaking down cultural barriers, as they have in the People's Republic of China. As in ping-pong diplomacy between the US and China in the 1970s, sports and cultural exchanges provide an opportunity for building relations and a stronger platform for human rights issues to be addressed. We have witnessed at first-hand the impact of cultural exchanges and from experience have seen they are a significant tool to engage with North Korea on a political and moral level that is currently under-utilised.

We accept that the North Korean government may use cultural exchanges as propaganda. However, the North Korean public are very much aware of the lack of information from the outside and that they are restricted in receiving it. Whilst

engagement with North Korea is very strictly controlled, the lack of anything new in the country has given the Koreans an increased interest in the West. Cultural exchanges have a massive impact in a country where there is so little ‘new’ information leaching in from the outside world. Within this tightly controlled society there are individual Koreans who are willing to push at the edges—and they are very happy to work on cultural projects. We are in a very lucky position to have Korean friends who, whilst they have enormous constraints on what they can and cannot do, are prepared to push the limits.

### **The impact of football**

We would very much like to develop football exchanges with North Korea and the United Kingdom, as this is where any cultural exchange would have the biggest impact. The Koreans love football and their teams are of a high standard. Their women’s national team reached the 2003 Women’s World Cup in the United States and their men’s team performs well in the Asian championships. The love of football is a common bond on the Korean peninsula. Inter-Korean matches have been played over the years, and the success of the South Korean team in reaching the semi-final in the 2002 World Cup series (hosted jointly in the Republic of Korea and Japan) had a big impact, with North Koreans supporting the success of the South.

The DPRK is a country where the West is an abstract. Once there, the world you know does not exist. (September 11 and the ‘end’ of the Iraq war were not reported by the official media until a week after the events.) Football brings the outside world into the country. North Korea has one television channel during the week and an additional weekend television programme which occasionally shows international football. There is a thirst in North Korea for news of international football—even David Beckham is known there. In 1966, a cultural bridge was made between the DPRK and the West via the medium of football and the World Cup series. With VeryMuchSo Productions UK we conceived and arranged for the return of the DPRK 1966 World Cup team to the United Kingdom in October 2002. On the two occasions that the 1966 North Korean World Cup team came to England they were feted as heroes. The major impact of this friendship was in North Korea, where the public saw their heroes supported by the English fans and therefore changed many preconceptions that they had of the English. In the DPRK, the 1966 team refereed an informal match between the North Korean Foreign Ministry and a team drawn from Western embassies and aid organisations. In the UK, the ROK ambassador to Britain attended a reception for the North Korean team and met the players. In 2004, the 1966 team were invited by the British Embassy in the DPRK to attend the 2004 Queen’s birthday reception.

## Film productions

### *The Game of Their Lives*

This documentary film centred on the North Korean World Cup team of 1966. They arrived in England as 2000 to 1 outsiders, but at the match in Middlesbrough in northeast England beat Italy, one of the favourites, and went through to the quarter-finals. Their arrival in the UK led to many political manoeuvrings. The British government did not want to give recognition to North Korea and succeeded in banning the playing of national anthems, apart from at the opening and closing ceremonies, and in permitting no reference to the ‘DPRK’, only to ‘North Korea’. The team that came to the UK as the enemy and left having created a coup were embraced by the footballing world and above all adopted by the town of Middlesbrough.

No one believed we would meet the seven surviving players from the 1966 team, let alone be allowed to film, and that therefore we would have no choice but to cancel the project or raise the money with family and friends. We did meet the players and had enormous—in North Korean eyes unprecedented—access. For the first time Westerners had a glimpse into North Korean society. Allegations had been made in the West that the team had been disgraced on their return to North Korea and that they had lost their semi-final game against Portugal because of too much drinking and womanising. We were able to raise the allegations of player Pak Sung Jin’s incarceration and of the ‘womanising and drinking’ and the arrest of the players on their return to their country. The film was a great success and received worldwide screenings. It was the first time a documentary had been shown in both North and South Korea. It won the Royal Television Society award and a ‘special prize’ at the Pyongyang film festival.

In October 2002, we took the players back to the UK. Funding was not



Fig.2. Ri Chan Myong, goalkeeper in the North Korean team of 1966, waving to the crowds at half-time at the Riverside stadium, home of Middlesbrough Football Club, October 2002. Over 30,000 fans gave the surviving members of the team a standing ovation.

forthcoming. We approached many potential sponsors but they were without doubt aware of the sensitivity of being seen as “supporting a rogue regime”. Virgin Atlantic flew the players over in first class from China to Britain, but from then on the players had to look after themselves, with friends putting them up. Generous donations from individuals allowed us to rent the bus, pay for accommodation and meals and meet other necessities. A total of over 100,000 English football fans welcomed the players ‘home’ as they came on the pitch at Everton and Middlesbrough football clubs. The North Korean delegation travelled to Britain with a cameraman, and the resulting documentary they made was shown nine times in the DPRK. It was the first time that Britain had been portrayed in a positive light to the Koreans. It was also probably the only significant positive press North Korea has ever had in the West.

### *A State of Mind*

Our second film was on the mass games that play such a prominent part in Pyongyang life. We thought we would get access to the mechanics of the mass games, but what we did not realise was the insight into North Korean society we would be allowed. The documentary was screened in both North and South Korea but on this occasion had a première at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York and a film run in the US. It has received critical acclaim. For many it confirms their pre-conceived ideas on the



Fig.3. Archive photograph of Song Yon, one of the gymnasts, and her family

control of the DPRK government, for others it also reveals the humanity of the people of North Korea. The North Korean criticism of our film was that it “was not as good as ‘The Game of Their Lives’ but was rather dull to a Korean because it was just like normal life.” We could not have asked for a better criticism.

### *Crossing the Line*

Our third documentary was started in May 2004. The world première was held in October 2006 at the Pusan Film Festival in South Korea. The film follows the extraordinary life of Joe Dresnok. In 1962, Dresnok, a US soldier, was posted to guard the peace in South Korea on the 38th parallel. At the height of the cold war, he deserted his unit, walked across the heavily fortified area dividing the two Koreas and defected to the North. The existence of an American defector was denied for decades by both the US and DPRK governments and only in 1996 did the US declare knowledge of Joe Dresnok and of a small group of other US defectors still living in the North. He became a coveted star of North Korean propaganda, and found fame acting in films, typecast as an evil American. He has lived in North Korea twice as long as he has in America. He uses Korean as his daily language and has three sons from two wives. This film was obviously more difficult to make than our previous two; nonetheless, the access we had was exceptional.



Fig.4. Film crew at the Joint Security Area, Panmunjom

We have never had our films or radio shows censored. The first time the Koreans see a film is when it has already been shown in the West. In all three films we have had this unprecedented access and broached sensitive subjects and in so doing have revealed a greater insight into North Korean society.

## **Need for official support**

We believe grass-roots engagement should continue with the DPRK. Engagement with the common North Korean in our minds can only be beneficial. However, many of our projects are limited by the lack of finance and more importantly support. With government approval and involvement, the private sector would be much more willing to sponsor projects that would show the Korean people just what is happening in the world outside their borders.

North Korea has an isolationist policy and we believe that, as part of a balanced policy of ‘stick and carrot’ towards North Korea, Britain should promote cultural exchanges as a way of helping to break this isolation. Football is the ideal medium for this, to exploit existing sporting links between Britain and North Korea. It is the game the North Koreans love and it captures their imagination. Even small-scale football exchanges would expose hundreds, possible tens of thousands, of ordinary Koreans to foreigners and stimulate further interest in the outside world. We believe that it is especially younger people who the British government should be doing more to target, and it is the Korean’s love of football where the greatest impact would be.

## **Appendix**

Interview with Mr Kim Gyong Nam (father of one of the gymnasts) during the making of *A State of Mind* (VMS/KORYO/BBC)

I’ve been interested in sport and the arts since I was young. When I was at school. I did a bit of gymnastics, and in football...since I couldn’t kick the ball very well, so every time we played football at school I was goalkeeper. Whatever the West has thought up until now, we and the people of South Korea are one nation and are compatriots of the same bloodline. I think our fourth place in the men’s football [at the] last Asian Games [held in 2002 in Pusan in South Korea] was a proud moment in the history of our nation. I recall the emotion of the 1960s when our footballers beat Italy 1:0 and got to the quarter-finals of the world cup. Looking at those two matches, I feel confident that if only the North and South were reunited and we played as one team, we would be superior to any team in the world. So just by looking at this match, you can see how for us, reunification is such an important issue for the future of our nation—as a people, such sports matches cause us to feel very strong emotions. Right from the preliminary matches, people watching the South Korean [football] players saw that they were trying very hard to win first place



Fig.5. Kim Gyong Nam, interviewed during the making of the film *A State of Mind*

[in the World Cup 2002]—we also saw it with our own eyes—you could tell just by the way they played. Every time we saw scenes of our South Korean players playing just as well as countries with a long history of football and scoring goals against them, we were delighted and felt a lot of national pride. Even though we were watching it on TV, we gave real applause whenever they scored a goal. You could say we felt as if we were playing together with the players.

*Editor's note:* This paper is based on an earlier text by Nick Bonner, who has revised and updated the written material and supplied all photographs.