Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures
Polish Academy of Sciences

ACTA ASIATICA VARSOVIENSIA

No. 30

Issue 2

Warszawa 2017

PL ISSN 0860–6102
eISSN 2449–8653
ISBN 978–83–7452–091–1

ACTA ASIATICA VARSOVIENSIA is abstracted in
The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Index Copernicus, ProQuest Database

Contents

ARTICLES:

BOOK REVIEW:

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PL ISSN 0860–6102
ACTA ASIATICA
VARSOVIENSIA
No. 30, 2017

Pioneers of the Times: North Korea's Claim to Contemporaneity circa 1989

Abstract

This article examines the discourse and visual culture surrounding the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students, which took place in Pyongyang in July 1989. I show how the visual ephemera, performances, and architectural monuments connected to the event served as a call to acknowledge the prevailing effects of the Cold War era at a historical moment widely heralded as marking a definitive thaw in Cold War tensions and the emergence of the so-called global contemporary period.

Key words: Cold War; Council of European National Youth Committees (CENYC); Global contemporary; Lim Su-kyung; North Korea, World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY); World Festival of Youth and Students.

Introduction

On 1 July 1989, Pyongyang welcomed delegates from over 170 countries for the opening of the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students.[1] With North Korea remaining one of the last closed-door communist countries in the world, this weeklong celebration of the international youth movement amounted to what the journalist Liz McGregor described as the "biggest invasion of foreigners since the Korean War."[2] Inaugurated in 1947 and jointly organized by the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) and the International Union of Students (IUS), the Festival of Youth and Students had taken place at irregular intervals every two to five years, typically in capital cities within the Soviet Union.[3] The 1989 festival marked the first time that

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[1] Hereafter I will refer to the event as the Pyongyang Festival in keeping with contemporaneous Korean language literature.

[2] Liz McGregor, "Festival of Youth Threatens to Lift the Lid on North Korea: Some 15,000 Young People Are Soon to Descend Upon Pyongyang," *Independent*, 9 May 1989.

[3] For a brief historical overview of first twelve youth festivals, see the WFDY publication *World Youth* vol. 2, 1989, pp. 2–26.

the event would be held in East Asia. It also stood as the biggest instantiation of the festival to date, both in terms of the number of participating countries and its physical scale.

Although North Korea did not officially win the bid for the festival until 1987, the state had begun construction on facilities that would eventually be used for the occasion, such as stadia and hotels, one year earlier with an eye towards co-hosting the 1988 Summer Olympics with Seoul. Any prospects that North and South Korea might jointly host the Games were quickly nullified, however, as the International Olympic Committee deemed North Korea's stipulations excessive and the South Korean government instituted its so-called Nordpolitik policy in an effort to ostracize North Korea from the global community.[4] Unable to participate in or prevent the Seoul Olympics from taking place, Pyongyang looked to the World Festival of Youth and Students as a means of proving its ability to facilitate an event as monumental as the Olympics.

From the early preparatory stages, a deep rift emerged between the festival's international organizing committees and the North Korean state, chiefly because each entity's ambitions for the event rested on divergent understandings of the contemporary moment and its historical significance. For the majority of the international organizers, the late 1980s signaled a shift towards an increasingly global and decentered structuring of the youth movement, as the geopolitical alliances of the Cold War gave way to an era of globalized networks. The official emblem of the festival reflects this outlook [fig. 1]. Flower petals signifying each of the five participating continents surround a central globe while lines of longitude and latitude within the globe are intersected by the outline of a dove, an overt iconographic complement to the festival's official slogan: "For Anti-Imperialist Solidarity, Peace and Friendship." By contrast, the North Korean state saw the youth movement's vague aspirations of universality as readily collapsible into its own image repertoire and ideological infrastructure. A North Korean badge produced for the event, for example, repeats the central globe of the festival emblem, but with the dove replaced by the *ch'ŏllima* (literally, "thousand *li* horse"), the symbol of North Korea's core

[4] Charles Armstrong, "South Korea's Northern Policy," *Pacific Review* Vol. 3, No. 1, 1990, pp. 35–45.

productivity campaign [fig. 2].[5] Supporting a gallantly posed worker on its back, the winged horse springs diagonally across the globe, transcending divisions between east and west, north and south. Here, the global reach of the youth movement inheres within North Korea's drive towards expeditious production and the construction of a socialist utopia under the guidance of Kim Il-sung.

Noting obvious tensions between the international youth movement and the North Korean state, journalists attending the festival wrote that Pyongyang appeared to be "locked in a totalitarian time capsule" and conspicuously out of sync with the global community.[6] Such assessments stemmed in large part from the seemingly outmoded propaganda posters plastered throughout the capital, the ostentatious architectural monuments that dominated the urban landscape of the city, and the impeccably choreographed performances of the opening ceremony, all of which recalled the imposing aesthetics of Soviet socialist realism. More than a nostalgic appropriation of Stalinist vintage, however, the Pyongyang Festival, and its aesthetic components in particular, might be understood as complicating what many saw as a definitive paradigmatic shift in the late 1980s from the era of the Cold War to what is now often referred to in visual culture studies as the "global contemporary." Such a perception was undoubtedly bolstered by the unforeseen establishment of diplomatic ties between South Korea and Hungary in 1988 as well as the televisual spectacle of global conviviality that accompanied the Seoul Olympics. The present essay bears on how the Pyongyang Festival projected and problematized North Korea's contentious relation to this newly emerging global order.

I begin from the premise that to fully understand the historical emergence of the global contemporary, it is necessary to consider those entities that remained fervently committed to ostensibly obsolete doctrines and worldviews. On this point I take a cue from the art historian Terry Smith, who notes that to be contemporary often entails "standing, in important senses, at once *within* and *against* the times" despite the fact that the term often conjures celebratory notions of

[5] On the *ch'ŏllima* movement, see Peter Graham Moody, "Chollima, the Thousand Li Flying Horse: Neo-traditionalism at Work in North Korea," *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2013, pp. 211–33.
[6] Liz McGregor, "Shabby Paradise of the Great Leader," *Independent*, 2 May 1988.

coexistence and synchronicity.[7] In what follows, I offer an account of how the Pyongyang Festival was discursively framed by its international organizers and by the North Korean state, highlighting how competing understandings of contemporaneity underpinned the passage from the Cold War era to the age of the global in the late 1980s. I then demonstrate how the visual culture of the festival, including the opening ceremony and newly built architectural monuments, marked an attempt by the North Korean state to stand against emerging conceptions of contemporary global culture. In turn, the visual culture of the festival unwittingly brought into sharp focus how the effects of the Cold War continued to bear down upon the divided Korean peninsula in the present. More than merely staging a confrontation between two incompatible worldviews, I submit, the Pyongyang Festival occasioned an opportunity to think of the contemporary in terms that exceed a binary opposition between the dominant global order and its ideological discontents.

Prospects of the Pyongyang Festival

In October 1987, the Council of European National Youth Committees (CENYC), a conglomerate of organizations responsible for planning the World Festival of Youth and Students, convened in Nicosia in advance of the Pyongyang Festival. The ensuing discussion turned on the question of how the format and focus of the festival, which had remained relatively static throughout the decades of the Cold War, might adapt to the geopolitical conditions of the contemporary moment. Specifically, delegates averred that the scope of the event could no longer be restricted to the "east/west divide in Europe."[8] Rather, they agreed that "politics is global in the 1980s" and that the festival should strive to address a broader compass of social and political issues, including: development, peace, human rights, and the environment.[9] The various organizing committees in attendance concurred that by foregrounding these global issues, the festival would facilitate genuine dialogue between youth of different political, cultural, and religious backgrounds.

[7] Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2006, p. 703.
[8] CENYC, "A Festival Movement for the Future," 1987, Historical Archives of the European Union, European University Institute, Florence, IT (hereafter HAEU), p. 1.
[9] Ibidem.

In order to orient the event towards this objective of global inclusivity, the organizing committees maintained that future festivals should be less formal and less monumental than previous festivals. Concerns over Pyongyang's willingness to accede to such propositions mounted during the discussion, however, and in a report issued shortly after the Nicosia meeting, the CENYC noted that the North Korean representatives in attendance "were clearly uncomfortable with a number of the speeches, including some from socialist countries."[10] Nevertheless, the CENYC remained hopeful that the North Korean Preparatory Commission would elect to reduce the "triumphalism" of the event in response to points raised by delegates at the meeting, who reasoned that a diminished scale of the festival would allow attendees to act as "creatures of youth [organizations] and not governments."[11]

In actuality, the North Korean state harbored no intention of curtailing its prodigious aspirations for the festival, which were spurred by a desire to showcase the country's purported economic might in the wake of the Seoul Olympics.[12] While North Korean representatives remained reticent throughout the preparatory process, revealing only essential details about the host country's plans, drastic urban development initiatives continued uncurbed in Pyongyang. The North Korean capital was steadily transformed into a monumental stage for what would be the most extravagant iteration of the festival to date.

North Korea did express agreement with the idea that the Pyongyang Festival should strive to increase diversity and that it should speak to the most pressing concerns of youth around the world. At a meeting of the International Preparatory Committee in Pyongyang in April 1989, for instance, a spokesperson for the North Korean Preparatory Commission asserted:

> The content of the Festival must reflect always better the political situation in the moment of its realization. The youth and students have to be the masters of the Festival. That is why the youth and students of Korea welcome the participation of the youth and students

[10] CENYC, "Report on Informal Consultation on 13th World Festival of Youth and Students," Nicosia, 17–18 October 1987, HAEU, p. 2.
[11] Ibid., pp. 2, 6.
[12] Estimates of the total cost of the festival for North Korea range between $4 billion and $9 billion. Hy-Sang Lee, *North Korea: A Strange Socialist Fortress*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001, p. 144.

> from all countries all over the world in the Festival of Pyongyang, irrespective of their different ideologic[al], [religious], political or philosophical conceptions.[13]

Whether genuine or mere lip service, such proclamations did little to assuage growing concerns regarding North Korea's commitment to the ideals of the youth movement, especially given the reclusive state's stringent restrictions on international travel, the intensity of the Kim leadership cult, and the country's dubious human rights record.

Disjunctions between the policies and objectives of the North Korean state and the international organizers came to a head as the preparatory committees debated how to adequately address the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, which had begun in April 1989 and culminated in violent confrontations between authorities and demonstrators in early June, just one month before the festival was scheduled to open. This issue proved particularly sensitive because North Korea had made persistent—and tentatively successful—efforts to ensure China's participation in the festival following a series of boycotts that had begun in 1963. For North Korea, the participation of Chinese delegates was essential in order to project an image of amity amongst communist countries within the East Asian geopolitical sphere. North Korea was therefore reluctant to make any explicit accusations regarding the Tiananmen Square massacre, as such a move would almost certainly disturb the precarious relationships that had been formed between the Chinese government and festival organizers within and beyond Pyongyang. Furthermore, the North Korean Preparatory Commission undoubtedly remained fretful that discussions of the massacre would provoke critiques of the North Korean state's own disciplinary tactics aimed at preventing open expressions of dissent.[14]

By contrast, the committees associated with the CENYC argued that they had an obligation to address Tiananmen if the festival was to claim any relevance to the interests of the youth movement. From the

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[13] WFDY Press and Information Department, "Information on the Discussion on the Further Development of the Festival Movement," 4th meeting of the PIC for the 13th WFYS, Pyongyang, April 1989, HAEU, pp. 30–31.

[14] The event also went unreported in the North Korean media. Michael Harrold, *Comrades and Strangers: Behind the Closed Doors of North Korea*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2005, p. 184.

perspective of the CENYC, this responsibility had been concretized by media images of the massacre, which circulated widely in the weeks leading up to the festival. In a report issued just days before the opening ceremony, the CENYC proclaimed:

> This is a festival in the age of mass media. We cannot deny the image that a thousand television cameras have brought into the homes of young people all over the world, images of horror and carnage, images of the repression of peaceful action of Chinese youth and students.[15]

Televisual images, to follow this line of thinking, had rendered the event a global tragedy as opposed to a localized struggle, making it one of the foremost concerns of youth across the globe.

As enthusiasm regarding the Pyongyang Festival waned considerably in light of these tensions, certain entities remained convinced that the geopolitical context of North Korea offered a significant opportunity to confront the ongoing repercussions of the Cold War in the contemporary moment. For example, members from the African National Congress Youth League (ANC) declared:

> We [hear] a lot of arguments on common home, new thinking, relaxation of tension, we see ourselves in a situation where nuclear weapons are put in cold storage. But we are of the opinion that [the] [C]old [W]ar is not completely dead. We only have to look at the recent nuclear test of the US, at the "Team Spirit" [military exercise] on the Korean peninsula.[16]

As noted by the ANC, tensions directly tied to the ideological standoff of the Cold War escalated precipitously on the Korean peninsula as the Pyongyang festival approached. South Korea's President Roh Tae-woo refused to allow South Korean students to travel to North Korea for the festival. Accusing the north of provoking "leftist agitation" in South Korea, Roh berated the North Korean government

[15] CENYC, "Speech to the Vth IPC of the XIIIth World Festival of Youth and Students," 29 June 1989, HAEU, n.p.

[16] WFDY Press and Information Department, "Information on the Discussion on the Further Development of the Festival Movement, 4th meeting of the PIC for the 13th WFYS, Pyongyang," April 1989, HAEU, p. 31.

for turning the festival into a propaganda campaign.[17] In response to the government's prohibition on travel to North Korea, South Korean students planned several marches to the Korean Demilitarized Zone, each of which resulted in clashes with South Korean riot police. In an effort to reframe international perception during the media frenzy that erupted in tandem with these demonstrations, North Korean officials charged foreign journalists with countering widespread representations of the country as a phantasm of a bygone era. For example, Kim Jong-dol, the senior official of the festival, explained to the reporter Jasper Becker: "We want you journalists to light a candle and show the world that there are not ghosts but real people here."[18] Kim's language gestures suggestively to the fact that much of the world had been conditioned to see the North Korean people as specters belonging to a spatial and temporal domain entirely detached from that of the global community. In bringing these ostensibly disparate worlds face to face, the Pyongyang Festival would put pressure on the dominant rhetoric of inclusiveness so pervasive in the discourse surrounding the event, underscoring how the world remained divided by Cold War ideologies down to the present.

Contemporaneity on Parade

To open the festival, delegates paraded through the streets of Pyongyang and filed into the newly built May Day Stadium. Situated on an islet of the Taedong River, the facility features a flamboyant façade comprised of concentric arches encasing a circular interior. The curvilinear profile of the building diverges appreciably from the stringent rectilinear architecture ubiquitous throughout Pyongyang, standing as an aesthetic focal point of the North Korean capital. Representations of the stadium appeared frequently in visual ephemera produced for the festival, which tellingly connected the singular form of the stadium to the internationalism of the event as well as to nativist Korean iconography, evidencing North Korea's desire to encompass the universal outlook of the youth movement within its ideological contours. For the duration of the ceremony, the space of the stadium

[17] Steven Weisman, "In Seoul, a Hot Debate on Dealing with the North," *New York Times*, 1 July 1989.
[18] Jasper Becker, "High Heels Hint at Glasnost in North Korean Capital," *Guardian,* 4 May 1989.

thus acted as a microcosm of the festival as a whole, enveloping competing enunciations of the event's symbolic import.

Witness an invitation card issued in advance of the ceremony, which shows the May Day Stadium suspended in the night sky amidst a display of festival fireworks [fig. 3]. Here, the form of the monument constellates with the celebratory explosions in a triumphant expression of international conviviality, an idea repeatedly articulated in contemporaneous North Korean reports on the festival. In a review of the opening ceremony, for instance, the journalist Lee Sang-bok described every dance movement as expressing the burning resolve of youth and students worldwide to prevent war and to "build a peaceful new world."[19] Such accounts recapitulated the nebulous expressions of unity so abundant in the slogans and songs that filled the stadium during the ceremony, as in the official festival song, which featured verses such as: "Different countries and nations/ We fight together against war/ Youth and students are masters of the future/ Let us sing the festival song together."[20] While on the surface these declarations of universality dovetailed with the stated ambitions of the organizing committees, North Korea's perception of the youth movement's global thrust clearly cut adrift from that of the youth movement at large, as the state openly grounded its conception of the festival in a spate of nativist mythological narratives.

Consider a separate representation of the stadium that appeared on one of the massive backdrops for the opening ceremony, which were formed by North Korean students holding individual colored cards along one side of the facility [fig. 4]. Displayed during the ceremonial lighting of the festival torch, the background casts the May Day Stadium's architectural form as an explicitly national symbol by literally drawing a connection between the shape of the building and the distinctive circular formation of Baekdu Mountain, the mythical origin point of the Korean nation. Punctuated by a succession of festival flames, a conspicuous red line extends from the distant mountain range in the upper left corner of the backdrop to the stadium in the lower right corner. The background thereby positions the Pyongyang Festival at the head of a historical trajectory stretching back to the imagined birthplace of Tangun, the

[19] Lee Sang-bok, "Segyeinmindŭri kiŏksoge yŏngwŏnhi namaissŭl sŏsashijŏng hwap'ok [An Epic Canvas that Will Remain in the Memory of the People of the World Forever" *Chosŏn Yesul* 10 (1989), p. 20.
[20] Ibid., p. 21.

purported founder of the first Korean kingdom in 2333 BCE, as well as Kim Jong-il, North Korea's heir apparent.[21] By linking the May Day Stadium to this sacred site, the backdrop portrays all previous youth festivals as anticipatory milestones leading to the total realization of the North Korean state's revolutionary project and the dawn of a historic era in which Kim Il-sung's *chuch'e* ideology and its call for self-reliance in all areas of politics and life would be fully realized. Indeed, Kim himself reiterated this claim in his opening speech by proclaiming that the event marked a passage from the "old world of aggression and war, domination and subjugation," to a "magnificent, historic age of creating a new world of independence [*chajusŏng*], peace and friendship."[22] In this imminent era, the youth of the world would act as "the pioneers of the times in the noble cause of building an independent new world."[23]

The ceremonial lighting of the festival flame, which culminated before the backdrop described above, performatively accentuated North Korea's attempts to incorporate the symbolic imagery of the festival into the scope of its revolutionary project. Indeed, the state turned the torch lighting ceremony into an elaborate ritual, which exceeded the official timeframe of the festival itself. North Korea had begun the formality on 4 June, almost one month before the opening of the festival, when veterans of the anti-Japanese struggle lit the festival torch in Poch'ŏnbo near the Chinese border on the occasion of the 52nd anniversary of a historic battle against Japanese imperialists. Significantly, North Korean historical narratives give pride of place to this battle so as to inflate the military feats of Kim Il-sung during the years in which he led an anti-colonial guerilla army in Manchuria.[24] From Poch'ŏnbo, the torchlight relay group traveled nearly 800 kilometers to Pyongyang, arriving on 25 June.[25] Augmenting the duration and geographic parameters of the ceremony, North Korea presented the torch symbol as a testament to its own revolutionary path, insinuating that Kim Il-sung's vision for the country might be projected

[21] Suk-young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 79–81.
[22] Kim Il-sŏng, *Ch'ŏngnyŏnhaksaengdŭrŭn shidaeŭi sŏn'gujaga toeja* [Let the Youth of the World Become Pioneers of the Times], P'yŏngyang: Chosŏllodongdangch'ulp'ansa, 1989, 4.
[23] Ibid., p. 7.
[24] Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 34–6.
[25] KCNA, "Torchlight Relay Group Arrives," *Pyongyang Times*, 1 July 1989.

across the globe, with all nations of the world uniting under the guidance of the Great Leader.

To be sure, the hagiographic claims advanced by the North Korean state during the opening ceremony did not go unchallenged by international participants, many of whom found the glorification of the country's leaders excessive, if not disconcerting. As one delegate bluntly opined, "young men with megaphones leading the audience in chants of 'Jong-il' and 'Juche' [*sic*.] were not in the spirit of the festival." [26] The ceremony therefore became a veritable semiotic showdown, as various international factions attempted to draw attention to the North Korean state's failure to comply with the fundamental tenets of the youth movement. A Norwegian delegation, for example, presented a banner criticizing North Korea's efforts to prevent representatives from Amnesty International from attending the festival.[27] Meanwhile, delegations from Denmark and Finland allegedly faced "both harassment and direct violent assault from the North Korean security people" for hoisting banners with slogans such as "Human Rights in North Korea Too."[28] Finally, a small group of participants organized a demonstration in support of the Chinese students victimized in the Tiananmen Square protests, prompting the North Korean state to intensify censorship of discussions related to Tiananmen throughout the festival.[29]

Such clashes momentarily subsided during one of the most climactic moments of the ceremony, however, when Lim Su-kyung entered the stadium as the sole delegate representing South Korea. A student at Seoul's Hanguk University of Foreign Studies and a member of Chŏndaehyŏp, South Korea's National Council of Student Representatives, Lim had travelled for ten days via Japan and Germany in order to participate in the festival against the proscriptions of the South Korean government. Upon arriving in Pyongyang, Lim found

[26] CENYC, "XIII World Festival of Youth and Student," 1989, HAEU, p. 5.
[27] Danish Youth Council "13th World Festival of Youth and Students July 1989 in Pyongyang," HAEU, p. 6.
[28] Ibidem.
[29] For example, shortly before a solidarity meeting between Nordic and Chinese students was scheduled to take place at the Scandinavian Club, all drivers responsible for transporting students to the event inexplicably succumbed to illness. Meanwhile, thousands of North Koreans engaged in folk dancing outside of the room where the meeting was to be held, in an obvious attempt to interrupt any conversation that might take place. Ibidem.

herself standing as a symbol of national reconciliation, with the North Korean press bestowing upon her the sobriquet "Flower of Reunification." As Lim entered the stadium at the conclusion of the parade of nations, she was greeted by a standing ovation from the senior dignitaries in attendance, including Kim Il-sung. Almost certainly facing imprisonment for her defiance of the South Korean state, her fortitudinous resolve in attending the festival pointed up the ways in which Cold War tensions had left a seemingly indelible mark on the divided Korean peninsula, much as the African National Congress Youth League had adamantly averred throughout the preparatory process. In turn, she ably rerouted the discourse surrounding the event, calling for the youth of the world to actively work towards dismantling such divisions.

International attendees found Lim's presence during the festival revelatory. Describing the moment when Lim entering the stadium, for example, the Argentinian filmmaker José Luis García recalls:

> I think that all of us who saw her in 1989 in Pyongyang, men and women, were struck by the same things: a woman, so young, so beautiful, so brave who was determined to cross all political, military, and cultural barriers that were placed before her. A kind of Joan of Arc, determined to sacrifice her life in the name of a whole generation, for the legitimate desire for the pacific reunification of all her people, the reunification of Korea. At that moment, I felt that she, in and of herself, was the incarnation of all the utopias that one could imagine.[30]

The power of Lim's image extended from the ways in which she provocatively straddled the various ideological positions set forth by the festival committees and the North Korean state, never fully aligning herself with any entity invested in consolidating specific understandings of the festival. A commemorative postcard produced in the wake of the festival highlights Lim's singular positioning. The image shows the Chŏndaehyŏp delegate marching in a parade to the May Day Stadium

[30] "Interview with Jose Luis Garcia," *The Girl from the South: A Film by José Louis García*, 2012 Toronto International Film Festival Press Kit, n.p.

for the opening ceremony. In contrast to the meticulously outfitted North Korean student representatives surrounding her, Lim dons a western style t-shirt gifted to her by a foreign delegate, which bears the festival slogan and features an image of an activist rebelliously raising his fist into the air. The image captures Lim as she lifts her hand as if to mirror the iconic protestor pictured on her shirt. In this moment, Lim appears as a participant in a propaganda performance while clearly departing from North Korea's punctilious prescriptions for proper revolutionary youth culture. Here, the Flower of Reunification occupies an ambiguous position that does not sit squarely within any established purview, gesturing instead towards the possibility of thinking and acting in ways that cut across ideological impasses.

Constructing Confrontations in the City of Youth

If the opening ceremony of the festival encapsulated the various tensions at play between the organizing committees and the North Korean state, the festival at large underscored this standoff. However, much like Lim Su-kyung's entrance during the opening ceremony, the festival also facilitated instances in which divisions between the international community and North Korea momentarily broke down, yielding more generative and equitable ways of acting within and against the ideologies structuring the contemporary era. The architecture North Korea constructed to house the festival activities provides a point of entry into the question of how the festival shaped such instances of conflict and potentiality.

The facilities North Korea provided for the Pyongyang Festival were, in the words of one CENCY representative, "on a scale never seen before," an achievement made all the more stunning by the fact that the majority of the new structures had been erected without the aid of modern construction technology. Although clearly in awe of this spectacular accomplishment, the CENYC representative went on to caution against what many international delegates saw as the blind allegiance of the North Korean citizenry to the leadership of Kim Il-sung, stressing that "unquestioning dedication to something the people ultimately do not understand except in the rhetoric they have learnt from the leaders, Great and Dear is frightening." [31] The representative's assessment evinces how the impressive monuments North Korea erected

[31] CENYC, "XIII World Festival of Youth and Student," 1989, HAEU, p. 4.

for the festival at once endowed Pyongyang with the visual hallmarks of a contemporary metropolis while also serving as a reminder of how the model of a Stalinist personality cult still held sway in the world despite the wave of glasnost that had spread throughout the Second World in recent years.

In a bulletin published in advance of the festival, the International Bureau for Youth Tourism and Exchanges reacted to Pyongyang's recent architectural renaissance by contrasting newly built areas of the capital with a denigrating description of the city under Japanese occupation between 1910 and 1945, when it remained a "typical colonial town with narrow dirty streets."[32] The Bureau lauded the North Korean state's rapid renovation of the capital, writing that Pyongyang had "become more beautiful, imposing and modern, a prosperous youthful city in the short span of 10 years, not 100 years."[33] As the text implies, the speed at which the city developed reinforced the notion of youthful vitality so ardently championed by the state, suggesting how North Korea sought to emblazon its conception of youth culture onto the urban landscape of the capital. Moreover, for the duration of the festival, the state sought to orchestrate the movement of bodies throughout the capital so as to ensure the high visibility of young North Korean students. Focusing particularly on areas of the city that would be featured in the event, the state strove to present international delegates with the image of a zealous student body wholeheartedly dedicated to carrying out the revolutionary project set forth by Kim Il-sung, emphatically declaiming a commitment to a model of youth culture obviously inconsistent with that of the festival organizers.

The bulk of the festival activities took place on Chongchun (Youth) and Kwangbok (Liberation) Streets, which run through an outlying district of Pyongyang near the Man'gyŏngdae Revolutionary Site, the birthplace of Kim Il-sung. These newly opened streets were, as one North Korean writer put it, "large enough to be compared to a town."[34] Indeed, they operated as isolated quarters during the festival because the state barred participants from venturing beyond these designated streets except for special events, when watchful guides would accompany them. Kwangbok Street in particular was seen as crowning a massive aesthetic

[32] International Bureau for Youth Tourism and Exchanges, *Information Bulletin*, 1989, p. 2.
[33] Ibid.
[34] *The 13th World Festival of Youth and Students*, Korea Pictorial: Pyongyang, 1989, p. 1.

transformation of Pyongyang, which Kim Jong-il had initiated in the mid-1980s. North Korean sources allege, for example, that upon examining a mock-up of architectural plans for the Man'gyŏngdae District in March 1985, Kim stipulated that apartment buildings on Kwangbok Street be constructed at differing heights such that they would appear in "a three-dimensional style" and give the vicinity a youthful appearance in contrast to the uniform planes of older apartment blocks.[35]

Marking the center point of Kwangbok Street, Man'gyŏngdae Schoolchildren's Palace stands as one of the preeminent architectural monuments constructed in anticipation of the festival. The palace, which opened on 2 May 1989, features an arresting façade in the shape of a sweeping arc, which opens onto Kwangbok Street. The dramatic exterior of the building professedly represents the "bosom of the party," and its embrace of North Korean children.[36] On the plaza in front of the building sits a sculpture entitled *Flower Carriage of Happiness* depicting eleven adolescents representing each year of compulsory education in North Korea [fig. 6]. Riding a carriage pulled by two winged horses, which spring up from the central axis of the main staircase, the children are portrayed as promising a new world constructed in accordance with Kim Il-sung's directives. A gold inscription on the wall of the palace lobby affirms this reading, explaining: "The children are treasures of our country. The future of Korea belongs to them."[37] With its highly didactic symbolism, the central placement of the palace on Kwangbok Street codified the festival by visually anchoring the event to North Korea's conception of a revolutionary youth culture based on allegiance to the state apparatus rather than opposition to authority. An ostensible testament to the symbiotic relationship between the nation's children and the state, the palace was intended to act as a stage on which international delegates would witness the willful submission of North Korean youth to the Kim leaders.

The response the state hoped to elicit through the Man'gyŏngdae Schoolchildren's Palace can be discerned from a film titled *The Country I Saw* (*Naega bon nala*). Released in 1988, the film follows Takashi

[35] Kim Son Guk, "Providing Guidance on Construction of Kwangbok Street," *Pyongyang Times*, 14 November 1987.
[36] *The Mangyondae Schoolchildren's Palace*, Pyongyang: Korea Pictorial, 1995, n.p.
[37] Ibidem.

Minoru, a Japanese journalist and lecturer who visits Pyongyang after a student challenges his claim that no country in the world had successfully established a truly communist society. Even though the film was released one year before the opening of the Man'gyŏngdae School Children's Palace, the building appears in the film and is represented as already complete when, after a series of episodes in which he comes to see North Korea as a socialist utopia, the journalist receives an invitation from Kim Il-sung to attend a New Year's performance at the palace. Cutting to the interior of the building, the camera centers on the backdrop of the recital stage, which depicts the exterior façade of the palace as seen from Kwangbok Street. In the context of the film, the palace acts as a metaphorical stand-in for Kim Il-sung, who does not make a physical appearance. Mesmerized by the backdrop, the journalist professes: "The comradely relationship between the leader who loves the people, and the people who hold him in high esteem—the relationship of a father to his sons and daughters—this is the source of the country's power and its social integrity."

While the state may have hoped that this overt characterization of youth culture as intimately and affirmatively connected to the personality cult surrounding Kim Il-sung would make a vivid impression on international delegates, its showcase city was unsurprisingly met with suspicion. Following the mass dissemination of media images showing the violence unleashed on demonstrators at Tiananmen Square, for instance, North Korea's promotion of an apparently docile youth culture likely seemed more in line with the antiquated archetype of the Young Pioneer groups so prevalent throughout the communist world in previous decades. For the international community, such a model of youth culture appeared unbefitting for the contemporary age in light of global crises that demanded ardent activism rather than coerced compliance. Indeed, reporters covering the festival described the subjectivity of North Korean youth as wholly authored and choreographed by the state. As the journalist David Holley claimed: "Pyongyang is a city of the young, the elite, the powerful. Everyone has been approved as politically acceptable. Almost nobody is old."[38]

[38] David Holley, "Signs of Normal City Life Missing: N. Korea's Capital Seems Like Hollywood Back Lot," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 1989.

Despite the clear divisions between perceptions of youth culture on part of the international participants and the North Korean state, compelling moments of overlap unfolded during the festival when delegates curiously partook in rituals connected to the Kim leadership cult and performed the role of youth culture prescribed by the state—no doubt with varying degrees of sincerity. Such fleeting encounters can be read as attempts to approach a system of thought otherwise construed as outmoded—or worse, altogether unintelligible—within the contemporary era. Performative gestures of this type were perhaps most overtly visible in activities connected to the Ryugyŏng Hotel, a massive 105-story building which, as one writer noted, "[dominated] the skyline like a Gothic cathedral in an old European town."[39] Standing 330 meters tall but still unfinished when the festival opened, the monumental structure had been intended as an overt symbol of North Korea's contemporaneity, triumphantly exceeding the height of the largest building South Korean architects had designed to date [fig. 7]. The festival's program of activities included an opportunity for international delegates to volunteer to assist North Korean laborers at the site. A documentary produced by North Korea in commemoration of the festival captures this event, showing a crowd of festivalgoers in white hard hats supporting North Korean construction workers by arduously shoveling and carrying away dirt from the vicinity of the hotel.[40] Through such images, the documentary blatantly attempts to circumscribe the international youth movement within the state's march towards productivity and prosperity, complementing many of the descriptions of foreign delegations that appeared in the North Korean press, which highlighted their purported adoration for the country's leaders.

The North Korean critic Cho T'aeuk, for instance, singled out occasions in which international participants ebulliently extoled Kim Il-sung, such as when a group of musicians and dancers from Trinidad performed songs in praise of the leader, including "The Song of General

[39] David Holley, "Deep Inferiority Complex Seen: N. Korea Puts on Best Face to Vie with South," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 1989.

[40] Released in 1989, the documentary was overdubbed in French for international release but is titled in Korean: *Che 13-ch'a Segye Ch'ŏngnyŏn Haksaeng Ch'ukchŏn* [The Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students].

Kim Il-sung." [41] Predictably, Cho cited such expressions as evidence that a commitment to the ideals of the festival movement unequivocally implied solidarity with the Kim leadership and its ideological agenda. To be sure, acts of tribute to the Great Leader were far from isolated during the festival and can be seen in much of the surviving documentation of the event, as in a calligraphic inscription of Kim Il-sung's name in Arabic produced by an Algerian delegate during one of the festival's cultural workshops [fig. 8].

The participation of the festival delegates in the construction of the Ryugyŏng Hotel stands as an especially powerful instance of such forms of engagement with North Korea's cultural frameworks, for in this case the youth of the world are portrayed as collaborators with the state in laying the foundation for what would have been a symbol of a utopian present. Here, however, the signifying structure outwardly coded by the monolithic motives of the state remains hollow. Through its incompleteness, the construction instigates forms of sociality between international delegates and North Korean citizens that undercut characterizations of Pyongyang as a totalitarian anachronism, instead projecting a model of the contemporary in which multifarious worlds and temporalities fold in on one another.

Conclusion

It would be a full eight years before another iteration of the youth festival would be organized, as the leading committees lost faith in the event's relevance to global youth culture in the 1990s. In the aftermath of the Pyongyang Festival, the committees assessed what they perceived as the foremost failures of the event, noting how "the Koreans created many problems…ignoring the international preparatory process." [42] One member of the CENYC went as far as to claim that the occasion had been "so stylized that it was neither a youth event, nor a festival."[43] Clearly, such evaluations stemmed from the organizers' dismay at the extravagant spectacle the festival had become, for North Korea's claim to contemporaneity could not have been more antithetical to their own conceptions of global youth culture at the historical crossroads of 1989.

[41] Cho T'aeuk, "Ttŭgŏun hŭmmo 5 taeryugŭi tach'aeroun muyong min mueongeuk" [With Fiery Admiration, a Variety of Dance and Pantomime from Five Continents], *Chosŏn Yesul*, Vol. 10, 1989, p. 23.
[42] CENYC, "XIII World Festival of Youth and Student," 1989, HAEU, p. 6.
[43] Ibid., 7.

As this essay has endeavored to show, however, the discourse and visual culture that coincided with the Pyongyang Festival magnified the interplay of Cold War ideologies that endured beneath the guise of a paradigmatic turn to the era of the global. A retrospective reading of the event thus gives us cause to rethink the fundamental terms by which we differentiate between constituents of the contemporary global network and its rogue outliers.

Figure 1. Soviet stamp featuring the official emblem of the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students, ca. 1989.

Figure 2. North Korean badge for the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students, ca. 1989.

Figure 3. Invitation to the Opening Ceremony of the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students, 1989.

Figure 4. Opening Ceremony of the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students, pictured in the official program for the event, 1989.

Figure 5. Commemorative Postcard showing Lim Su-kyung, 1989.

Figure. 6. Mangyongdae Schoolchildren's Palace, pictured on the front cover of *The Mangyongdae Schoolchildren's Palace*, Pyongyang: Korea Pictorial, 1995.

Figure 7. Ryugyŏng Hotel, Commemorative photograph, 1989.

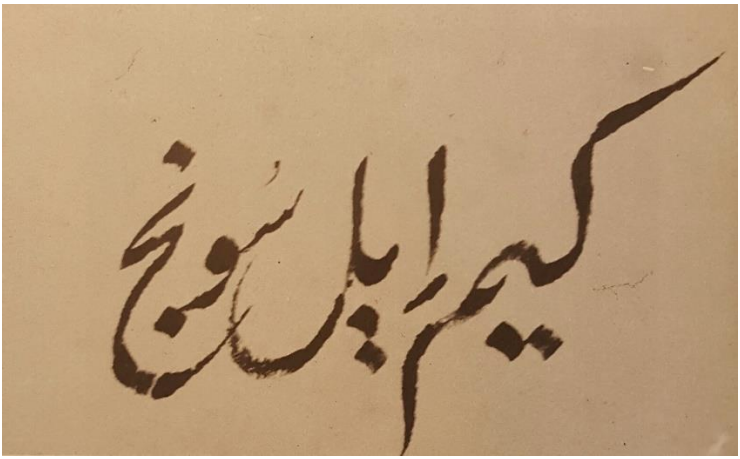

Figure 8. “Kim Il-sung,” calligraphy by an Algerian delegate to the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students, 1989.