

Attending the DPRK 70th Founding Anniversary Celebrations

Peter Wilson, Secretary, NZ DPRK Society. 24th September 2018

Six Kiwis and eight Australians attended the DPRK 70th Founding Celebrations which took place 7th – 11th September 2018 inclusive in Pyongyang. Referred to as the Oceania Delegation, the group stayed on in country an extra three days in order to sightsee, visit the DMZ, the Joint NZ/Australian Friendship Farm and the NZ Friendship School.

A total of 2,000 foreign delegates were in Pyongyang for the celebratory events. Of these some 250 (including the Oceania Delegation) were looked after by the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. The remaining 750 were looked after by numerous other sponsoring agencies.

Chair of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries is the revered Madam Kim Jong Sok, still remarkably vital and active at 87 years of age. She was present at many of the meetings and functions where she presented powerful keynote speeches in her characteristic strong deep voice.



Madam Kim Jong Sok, Chairwoman of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries

There could and should have been many more than the 2,000 visitors, but numbers were reduced as the result of an active campaign by the USA to dissuade people from visiting the DPRK for the Celebrations. In the Philippines 16 persons had signed up to attend, had

bought their air tickets and paid for their visas to transit China. Seven of them were visited by the National Security Agency and every one of them cancelled their trip. When the remainder of the Filipino delegation visited the Beijing Philippine Embassy on a courtesy call, they were informed that the USA had been putting pressure on the to not allow any Filipinos to visit the DPRK. In a brave move of defiance their Ambassador, Jose Santiago L. St. Romana flew into Pyongyang and joined the Filipino group to attend the two main events on 9 September which was Founding Day.

When chatting to a German visitor I asked him how many had come from his country. He replied very few as many had cancelled at the last moment. When asked why he said they dropped out because of pressure from America. Further, he told me that their Foreign Affairs Minister had publicly announced that he would be attending, but then later backtracked and said the he would not be going after all.

One has to suspect that the Philippines and Germany were not the only countries where this pressure was imposed.

Four of the Oceania Delegation had previously visited the DPRK and ten were first time visitors. The first timers were all curious to find out what the DPRK is really like. Mostly they were expecting a downtrodden, dirty, third world country. To their surprise this was not what they found.

“I have had to change my ideas 180 degrees!” as one of them said.

What they found were clean towns and cities and an independent people, proud of their culture and what they have achieved in 70 years - despite constraints of the decades old sanctions. Further, and more significantly, they found a people yearning for peace. As reiterated by last week’s Pyongyang Summit Joint Declaration, both Koreas are united in a desire for an end to the hostilities and a nuclear free Korean Peninsula.

While the USA’s rationale for their policy of enforcing isolation is said to be as a means of “forcing North Korea to the table” a few days in Pyongyang brings another reason to mind. It does not take long in country to realize that the picture of doom, gloom and repression painted in Western media is untrue. The standard of living for the average family is much better than many Asian countries. The economy appears to be booming. Also it becomes crystal clear that DPRK is not a threat to world peace. They do not want war. They just want to live normal lives like the rest of us and to be able to take their rightful place as members of the global village. These readily observable truths are something the Washington establishment does not want the world at large to know.

The organizational ability of the DPRK, as demonstrated by the week’s events, is most impressive. The 2,000 foreign visitors all came either as single individuals or as part of a small group. Everybody attended the four main celebration events:

1. Concert evening of 8th Sept.
2. Military Parade morning of 9th Sept.
3. Mass Games evening of 9th Sept.
4. Torch Parade evening 10th Sept.

Before, in between, and after these events, each small group had its own programme of sightseeing, visits to universities, hospitals, factories etc. An impressive logistical exercise.

The Evening Concert consisted of an hour plus of traditional music, song and dance. On the huge stage were a female wind orchestra, a male brass orchestra (both numbering some 60 players), a female choir and a male choir (both numbering some 100 singers) augmented by singers and exquisite dancing groups.



The two choirs to the rear left and right, two orchestras mid photo and dancers in foreground.

The Military Parade, as with the subsequent Mass Games and Torch Parade, was pure drama. The actual parade was preceded by some 8,000 soldiers executing a complicated series of precision marching manoeuvres, all to the rousing martial music of a military band. This started off slowly and gradually built up in tempo for the finale - a salute to Marshal Kim Jong Un with Li Zhanzhu, Head of the National People's Congress of China standing alongside. All very dramatic - particularly the routine by the dashing female sword dancers. As the military marchers withdrew, some 10,000 pompom bearers slowly moved in to fully occupy the square before the military parade part of the proceedings commenced. This was a relatively modest affair compared with parades of recent years, commencing with infantry units on foot and working up through APCs, light artillery, light tanks, heavier tanks and finally rocket launchers. The third, biggest phase of the parade, comprised some 800,000 – 1 million Pyongyang civilian residents marching past waving flags, pompoms, flowers and balloons. They were interspersed between a series of giant floats which portrayed a dominant theme of peace and goodwill.



Part of the civilian parade and a float showing recent buildings including the Science and Technology Centre and new residential apartments.

For most cities (even countries) it would be a major effort to orchestrate one such large event in a year, but that very evening an even larger event - the Mass Games – was presented to a capacity crowd in the 150,000 seat Rungrado May Day Stadium.

Featuring somewhere approaching 100,000 performers, the new iteration of the Mass Games has been variously translated as “Glorious Fatherland”, “Glorious Country” or “Bright Shining Fatherland”. It comprises 23 fast moving, sophisticated artistic presentations of gymnastics, dancing, marching and music in front of a constantly changing pixelated backdrop synthesized by 17,500 young people each with their own individual set of flip cards.

Where-as the previous show (Arirang) was darkly somber, expressing the anguish of a nation subjected to the harsh humiliation of Japanese colonial rule and the struggle to reconstruct after a debilitating war; the new forward-looking extravaganza is bright and bursting with optimism. Augmented by amazing laser-lighting effects, the show bubbles with an effervescent aura of pride in the achievements of 70 years of nation building and artistically expresses soaring hopes for a peaceful future.

One can only be inspired by a people able to collectively express the deep emotions of their past traumas and their hopeful aspirations for the future so poignantly through the mediums of music, song and dance.

The Torch Parade involved some 20,000 young people, each holding aloft two flaming torches. Waiting for dark to descend we viewed thousands of these torches stretching back as far as the eye could see in all streets leading into the square. When dark fell and they all came running out onto the parade ground we realized that this was not going to be a simple march past of torches. What we witnessed was a cleverly choreographed unique art form portraying an amazing range of scenes, atmospheres and emotions. For an example, imagine if you can, varying degrees of a ‘Mexican wave’ to achieve the fiery image of a wild storm tossed sea. This was an entrancing hour of magical visual drama.

To have held any one of these three major events – the Parade, the Mass Games and the theatre of the Torch Parade in one city in one year would be an impressive accomplishment. To seamlessly pull off all three without a single hitch within a 36 hour period defies the imagination. To say that all visitors were impressed, is an understatement.



One of the many Torch Parade formations

For all three of these big events, audience and most of the performers were bused to and from the show. In each case the square and stadium were empty (except for cleaners) within three quarters of an hour of the event finishing. Yet another example of the exceptional organizational abilities repeatedly displayed during the week.

The Peace March was a low key affair. After the appropriate speeches under the Unification Arch on the Southern outskirts of the city, the march headed North into Pyongyang, rather than South towards the ROK as on previous occasions. Surprisingly at this time of détente, the female lead band, instead of being dressed in white as a symbol of peace, were in military uniform this time. The symbolism of these two aspects of the parade are not clear to me.



Start of the Peace March

A visit to the **Pyongyang Teacher's Training College** was interesting. Classes all appeared to be small in number and high tech aids were very much in evidence.

Of particular note was a student gaining practical experience in how to teach per medium of a 'virtual class' on a huge TV screen. As we walked in the virtual class was in disarray and her task was to bring the class back to order and resume the lesson which she did. Whenever she asked a question, a virtual student answered accordingly sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly. One of the foreign visitors was asked to say something and in English said "Good Afternoon, how are you today?" The class answered back in unison "Very well thank you!"



Student Teacher addressing 'virtual' classroom of students at Pyongyang Teacher Training College

What used to be the **NZ Friendship Farm** was renamed the **NZ/Australian Friendship Farm** a few years ago. On arrival we received an effusive welcome from Madam Yong Ae, Chair of the farm management committee. She immediately launched into a description of how good the six small two wheel tractor/trailer units donated in 2015 are and told us how it is hard for her every day because so many work teams put in requests for use and she cannot keep them all happy. My guess is that they could easily use treble the number.

The school at the farm has 800 primary and secondary pupils and 55 teachers. We walked through the high school and observed a few classes being taught. It is the norm these days in all DPRK schools for the teacher to work from a laptop and illustrate whatever is being taught on a large TV screen at the front of the classroom.

Singing, dancing and music are introduced to pupils right from the pre-kindergarten nursery classes. In the music room we witnessed unsupervised young 6 or 7 year olds singing and dancing with great gusto in front of a large mirror and high school girls being taught a traditional folk dance. In the gymnasium older boys were playing a spirited game of volley ball. This was followed by a visit to the farm hospital which has been spruced up since our last visit three years ago. The hospital handles some 50 outpatients a day and accomplishes light surgery.

We then went into a large plastic roofed tunnel house where thousands of cucumber plants are being grown. Maximum use of space is made by training each plant to grow up a suspended string and everybody in our group put their hand to twisting a few plants around a string to encourage the upwards growth.

The farm has for many years been seeking to expand the Kindergarten and we unsuccessfully tried to get some funding for cement for this purpose in 2015. This year they have finally been able to accumulate enough money to buy the cement and are now nearing completion of an upgrade and expansion of the building. The Australians donated 500 Euros to help finish off the project.



Oceania Delegation at the Friendship Farm



Stringing up Cucumbers in the Tunnel House

The NZ Friendship School in Pyongyang has had a major upgrade and the addition of a new auditorium since our last visit. All very swish. Our old friend the headmaster has now retired and been replaced by Madam Choe Yong Sun whom we had previously met when she was deputy head. The school has expanded and now has 1500 students and 72

teachers. We were told there are 36 class rooms and 11 laboratories, but this is not correct as there are clearly many more than 47 rooms in the two buildings each of four floors, so something got lost in the translation there! We were pleased to be able to provide some locally purchased equipment for the school and this was gratefully received.



The Kiwi group with Headmistress outside the NZ Friendship School

Reflections on Returning Home

Members of the Oceania Delegation returned home with positive impressions of life in the DPRK. Living for a week amongst friendly, proud, peaceful people, experiencing their rich culture and observing their very normal everyday lives was an uplifting experience for all.

Over what is now a fifty year period of active involvement in Asia, I have always been impressed, indeed proud, of New Zealand's common-sense diplomatic efforts in the region under the successively named Department of External Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of External Relations and Trade and now the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Strangely however, this common sense approach to policy has not been applied to the DPRK.

Since January 1972 when they suggested an inter-Korean Peace Treaty, the DPRK has been seeking peace. Since March 1981 with the proposed establishment of a Non- nuclear Peace Zone the DPRK has been consistently advocating a nuclear-weapons free zone in N.E. Asia. New Zealand should have been actively encouraging and working with the DPRK on both of these issues.

Instead, inexplicably, Wellington has in recent years adopted a belligerent policy supporting diplomatic isolation and grossly inhumane sanctions, a most unfortunate miss-step - doubly so now, given the current climate of rapprochement created by the Panmunjom, Singapore and Pyongyang Summits.

How have our politicians and MFAT people have got it so wrong?