



North Korea's Building of a Civilized Socialist Country

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North Korea is undergoing rapid changes to join the international community following its declaration of building a “socialist civilization” in the 2012 New Year’s Address. At the Seventh Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) on May 7, 2016, Kim Jong Un defined a cultural power as one that “accelerate[s] the building of a highly civilized socialist country and thus bring[s] up all the people to be able men for the socialist construction with profound knowledge and cultural attainments.” As such, North Korea has been placing efforts to meet the international standards in various aspects. Most representatively, the country is seeking to improve the livelihoods of its people by revamping its cultural infrastructure, reframing its music to befit that of a civilized nation, and by developing its informational infrastructure to reflect current trends in media.

Tourism Industry

Amid these developments, there are key examples that signal changes within North Korea. Within the tourism sector, each region in North Korea has adopted tourism urbanization in order to provide the people with civilized lifestyles. For example, the Yangdok Hot Spring Resort, which began its construction on August 17, 2019 according to a local map, was completed on December 7, 2019 and opened in January 2020. This center is a “combined hot spring therapy facility and multi-functional sports and cultural complex conducive to the promotion of the people's health and their leisure

activities."¹ It is composed of both indoor and outdoor baths, a skiing ground, a horse-riding park, a resort, a section for therapy and convalescence, volunteer facilities, and multi-floored dwelling houses. The Yangdok Hot Spring Resort, since its beginning, was constructed as a state-approved model for future constructions and designed to reflect and emulate ‘international trends’ and ‘improved realities.’ The facility aims to be on a par with international standards as a main hot spring tourism attraction with the incorporation of herbal hot springs, Korean style hot spring baked eggs, and doctor fish, which are widely-used tourist goods in Asia.

At the ‘Sixth National Conference of War Veterans’ held in July 2020, Kim Jong Un invited attending veterans to the Yangdok Hot Spring Resort to promote the facility as one of his symbolic administrative achievements, considering how he had restored such an impoverished area into a place of cultural attraction within such a short period of time. This can be portrayed as an attempt by the Kim regime to elevate the people’s cultural standards to a global level by expanding their “realm of cultural lifestyles,” by introducing them to diverse experiences and by supporting their sentiment of cultural acceptance. At the same time, the addition of a golf course within the complex, among others, also implied that the facility would be catered for foreign tourists. Hence there seems to be a domestic motivation to develop a tourist attraction of a global standard—one which would be able to host foreigners and signal renewal of its tourist industry, especially amid continued sanctions. In addition to the Yangdok Hot Spring Resort, North Korea is also developing other special tourist zones such as the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Area as well as regions including Nampo and Chongjin. North Korea plans to continue utilizing its natural resources in the future to develop its domestic tourism.

Music Industry

With regard to the music industry, the introduction of the Samjiyon Orchestra and its special performance in honor of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics suggested a symbol of a new musical beginning for North Korea. The orchestra is considered as an expansion of the Samjiyon Band—a semi-orchestra that emerged in 2009—as it consists of central members from the band and other members from different major bands. On October 10, 2018, the Samjiyon Orchestra opened its exclusive theater, the Samjiyon Orchestra Theater. The theater emphasized its status as a “world-

¹ <https://www.nknews.org/2019/12/kim-jong-un-oversees-opening-of-yangdok-hot-springs-and-ski-resort/>

hub for cultural activities” and “a hall of modern arts and culture, where [the North Korean people] and artists could freely create and enjoy music and arts, as well as a sophisticated and civilized cultural lifestyle,”² especially considering how it is a “Saegulim Theater” that consists of pure music and without processed amplification.

However, it is ironic in that the Samjiyon Orchestra returned to classic light music instead of adhering to electronic music. Since Kim Jong Un came into power in 2012, the Moranbong Band had been established to place electronic music at the forefront to signal the emergence of a young leader who selected such genre to emphasize his connection with the ‘new generation’ and their sentiment and musical taste. But the Samjiyon Orchestra, by selecting the classic genre and by adopting the form of an orchestra, is utilizing the symbolic significance provided by a ‘classic orchestra.’ In the past, North Korea had established a national symphony orchestra to fortify its foundation and identity as an emerging cultural nation during its nation-building stages after declaring its independence. In this context, North Korea has portrayed the Samjiyon Orchestra as a symbol of its civilized socialist state by building upon the symphonic form based on cultural authority and an independent institution for music. Furthermore, as theaters of different countries provide a cultural indicator of the international standing, North Korea aimed to reify its international image through the arts by constructing a new national theater fit to be its national symbol.

Globalization of the musical realm could also be seen through music festivals. In 2018, North Korea held an international music festival entitled the “Pyongyang International Vocal Competition.” The competition was hosted by the Ministry of Culture “to find and promote talented new singers, and foster the exchange and culture and arts and assistance from countries all over the world.” As host of an international music competition, North Korea desires to showcase its international and musical capabilities and utilize the arts for state propaganda.

Stage Art

North Korea is experiencing a period of transition in stage art as seen through the 2019 New Year Celebration Concert. The state conducts various celebrations as it generally upholds both solar and lunar New Year. In particular, New Year celebrations held on the last day of each year have

² <https://dprktoday.com/abroad/news/10883>

generally been conducted indoors at a designated theater. From 2018, however, this celebration has been renamed as the “New Year’s Eve Concert” and converted into a large outdoor celebration held at the Kim Il-sung Square. The Kim Il-sung Square is located at the heart of Pyongyang and serves as a central place of gathering, embodying the country’s national spirit and holding diverse significance. The concert was conducted in an elaborate manner with various stage settings and props, including a large-scale stage and screen, laser spotlights, drones and fireworks.

Furthermore, the event resembled a typical large concert with a countdown until the New Year, an artillery salute, and people taking photos with their smartphones and cheering with character balloons in glow-in-the-dark sticks. Yet as an outdoor event held at temperatures below zero, choreographed dances and orchestral performances were not included in the program. The performers also did not wear Hanbok (traditional Korean attire) or other dresses but instead had on padded coats and fur hats, indicative of the cold sensible temperature. North Korea’s push to hold the event of such great scale with an innovative program and diverse elements despite unfavorable conditions suggests the nation’s desire to showcase its strength even amid sanctions. By utilizing theatrical elements that could only be enacted on a grand outdoor stage and having the people enjoy and cheer at the event, North Korea also wished to demonstrate its elevated cultural living standards.

Media & Technology

In the fields of media and IT, North Korea has aimed to promote itself overseas and establish a remote communication system through YouTube, as well as develop various software and other relevant technologies. North Korea has selected YouTube as its new medium for propaganda considering its wide reaching international audience. Its YouTube channel, “DPRK Today,” which opened on December 19, 2014, was discontinued and replaced by a new channel under the name “NEW DPRK” on October 10, 2019. This channel regularly uploads Vlog-type videos—those that capture one’s daily lives in a video format—with three hosts appearing individually in a television show format. Popular among these videos include “Rhee SooJin’s One-man TV show,” which features the daily life of Rhee SooJin, a 7-year-old girl. In the video, SooJin introduces the viewers to an average life in Pyongyang under various concepts including “Soojin at Home,” “Going to School,” and “Soojin Goes to the Hospital.” Other hosts perform hamburger “mukbang” at Moranbong’s Seokwang restaurant, visit the opening of the Pyeongyang International Film Festival, trim hair in Changkwangwon hair salon, and buy a cellphone(smartphone), all of which are to

showcase an "average life" in North Korea. The videos' English title and Chinese subtitles indicate that they are made for overseas promotion.

In the IT realm, North Korea is developing various education support programs and applications in order to establish an information infrastructure. In 2017, the state's Education Committee developed and utilized a remote testing system for college entrance exams. On May 23, 2019, the information technology lab at Kim Il-sung University's Institute of Advanced Science Institute created a virtual meeting system called "Rakwon" and introduced it nationwide. This virtual meeting system houses functions for sending videos and voice files, accessing electronic documents simultaneously, and for performing real-time multi-media tasks and virtual meetings. North Korea's official news source, the Rodong Sinmun, reported that the preliminary meeting for the Fifth Meeting of the Seventh Central Military Commission of the WPK on June 23, 2020 was run virtually.

Conclusion

North Korea's developments in music, arts, and technology indicate its continued efforts to build the nation into a civilized socialist country that meets international standards. In order to address its need to globalize, North Korea has been more accepting of the so-called symbols of capitalism and Western culture based on different reasons. These recent trends can be seen as North Korea's strategy to break free from previous stigmas and overcome sanctions by evolving into a normalized country and joining the international community. However, with the fallout of denuclearization talks, globalization can also be characterized as part of North Korea's efforts to improve "self-reliance" and its overall international standing.

This process also has its shortcomings in that as North Korea opens its doors to external culture in an accelerated fashion, its people will also accept these changes more rapidly, consequently expanding the scope of subcultures. As an example, North Korea deemed that young men who "keep their hairstyle excessively long and tie a topknot, or have their bangs covering half of their faces"³ do not fit the nation's vision for aesthetics and encouraged them to comply with the social atmosphere by adopting the standard norms set by the state. The state also argued that the clothes and hairstyles of its people reflect "the level of civilization of the socialist state," and

³ http://www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-06-14-0025

pressured the people to adopt looks that befit a “civilized country.” In this manner, North Korea views its people as objects of enlightenment by requiring them to become “civilized” as defined by the state’s developmental views. North Korea has indicated that its ultimate goal of building a “civilized socialist country” is to expand upon the people’s privileges and “appreciate and love [its] people.” However, we can only remain uncertain of whether these acts are truly for the sake of the people. Questions of whether North Korea is truly fighting to build itself into a civilized socialist country for the “love of its people,” and how long such “Truman Show” will last depend on the will of the people who are the actors of this scenario.

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