

*Michael J. Madden*

## THE SHORT, HAPPY LIFE OF THE RYUGYONG HOTEL

**ABSTRACT:** *Called the "worst building in the history of mankind" by Esquire Magazine, North Korea's Ryugyong Hotel is one of the twenty tallest buildings in the world, despite being little more than a desolate concrete shell. How the building came to be constructed and who constructed becomes a small cultural history lesson on the secret communist state.*

In 1987, in the Pothonggang District of Pyongyang, DPRK, cement masons poured concrete, laying the foundation of a massive hotel. This hotel was comprised entirely of strategically poured concrete. The hotel was to become its own arrondissement within the capital of North Korea with its own hospital, seven restaurants and night clubs, its own post office, and close walking distance to the city's centre and its historic sites.

For sixteen years elite members of North Korea's building trades worked sixteen hours a day, six days a week. From one perspective this was a gargantuan communal act to save face. In the South, in the ROK, preparations were underway to host the Summer Olympic Games in Seoul. There had been some discussion (though no one knows how serious) that the Olympics might be co-hosted between both Koreas. But this was not why the North might have felt marginalized. In Singapore, in 1986, a South Korean company finished building the I.M. Pei-designed Stamford Hotel, a 73-story, 741 foot luxury hotel. And if we take the face-saving perspective, these cement masons were dutifully and diligently overcoming perceived alienation. But in 1992, construction stopped.

Pyongyangites and North Koreans were left with the Ryugyong Hotel, a desolate reinforced-concrete shell that juts into Pyongyang's skyline at 1,083 feet which is about the size of the Chrysler Building in New York City (though not as narrow). Three wings at the base form into a thin pyramid spread into 3,875,000 square feet. At the apex is a concrete ring of eight floors

which were intended to be revolving restaurants topped by a further six stories. Occupied or not, it is one of the world's twenty tallest buildings.

So, the co-hosted Korean Olympiad never happened. And there was no realistic way the Ryugyong Hotel would be finished to host the 1989 World Youth Festival, another reason cited for its construction. The World Youth Festival was the DPRK's response to the Seoul Olympics and its last cultural contribution to the Soviet-era Non-Aligned Movement. After the Ryugyong's construction began, and to meet the lodging needs of World Festival participants, four international hotels were added to Pyongyang. Prior to the construction of the Ryugyong, the last DPRK hotel construction project was the Pyongyang Koryo.

The Pyongyang Koryo is the largest functional hotel in the DPRK and building that was ambitious. In a twin tower, fifteen stories capped by a revolving restaurant, the Pyongyang Koryo has 500 guest rooms. It is the accommodation of assignment for visiting Americans, including US Ambassador Christopher Hill in his frequent visits and Secretary of State Madeline Albright in her 2000 visit. Is there demand at any given time for 500 luxury hotel rooms in Pyongyang? But the Pyongyang Koryo's 1985 opening ended an urban reconstruction project. The hotel's neighborhood includes the apartments and offices of the DPRK's leadership and the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Central Committee, the same entity which authorized the area's reconstruction. Whatever its intended use and despite its ostentatious construction, the Pyongyang Koryo was at the very least part of standard urban planning and renovation.

And yet, standard is an inappropriate word to apply to city planning in Pyongyang. This is a city that was leveled by air strikes during two wars. After both wars, the KWP instigated propaganda and mobilization campaign to rebuild the country, starting with Pyongyang, the claimed "urban workers' paradise." Absent post-war reconstruction there are two reasons why construction was authorized in Pyongyang. First, there was the practical and technocratic reason of development and expansion. With the development of North Korea as a state, the capital city has had to absorb its surrounding towns and cities. Major construction in Pyongyang in 1956, 1967, 1974, and 1984 coincides with years when the Central Committee annexed counties from Pyongyang's neighboring province of South Pyongan. Other years (1971-1972; 1980-1982, 1992) provide the other reason for construction in Pyongyang.

The cult of personality that predominates politics, government and culture in the DPRK is centered on its late President, Kim Il Sung, and his son,

General Kim Jong-il. Kim Il Sung is the face man, the front company, of the DPRK's leadership; Kim Jong Il is the little man standing behind curtain. There are about 25 major statues of Kim Il Sung in North Korea, in addition to countless murals, autograph slogan monuments (language characters of the elder Kim's sayings or speeches) and Immortality Towers (granite tributes erected in every major DPRK city after Kim Il Sung died). There is even Road of the People's Revolution markers, which are road stops along DPRK highways that mark locales where President Kim visited during his term in office.

While Kim Jong il's smiling countenance shines forth from many realist murals, there are only two known statues of the Dear Leader. Like the film maker that he actually is, Kim Jong Il just wants a credit. By the late 1960s, Kim Jong Il established himself as a leader in the Central Committee of the KWP. His first major action, which endeared him to his father, was planning construction in Pyongyang timed to finish in April 1972, Kim Il Sung's sixtieth birthday. At the KWP Sixth Party Congress in 1980, Kim Jong Il was elevated to several positions in the Central Committee, and his first act was to instigate and plan a renovation of Pyongyang and supervise the erection of monuments to the Party and People which would usher in Kim Il Sung's seventieth birthday.

The two most notable contributions to North Korean culture to emerge from Pyongyang's 1980-1982 re-constructions were the Triumphal Arch and the Tower to the Juche Idea. The Tower to the Juche Idea is a 200-foot torch with a red metal flame at the top. The Juche Idea, "ju" meaning master and "che" self, is Kim Il Sung's pan-Korean communist philosophy; Leninism writ Kim. The Triumphal Arch is a triumph of hagiography, dedicated to Kim Il Sung's "triumphal return" having "liberated Korea from Japanese colonialism." This is based on the DPRK's official history where General Kim Il Sung takes a victorious trip back to Pyongyang at the end of the Second World War in 1945. Not mentioned is Japan's surrender or the brief occupation of Pyongyang by the Soviets that installed Kim Il Sung. It is an exact white granite replica of Paris's Arc de Triomphe, only 10.5 meters taller at 60 meters (about 190 feet), and framed with seventy azaleas as a birthday tribute to Kim Il Sung. The people who constructed the Triumphal Arch and the Tower to the Juche Idea would be assigned to labor crews to build the Ryugyong Hotel.

But to what end? The DPRK did not seem to have a practical idea in mind for the Ryugyong. As late as 1991, the DPRK was soliciting foreign investment through a Japanese marketing firm. When work on the

Ryugyong stopped in 1992, the elite construction workers' units were disbanded. To present an image of ongoing construction, two cranes were left to perch from the upper floors. Even if the building was unoccupied in 1992, Kim Il Sung could celebrate his eightieth birthday with one of the world's tallest buildings. The next year, the DPRK turned away from the super-hotel business to withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in March 1993 and testing the Nodong-1 ballistic missile in the Sea of Japan (or East Sea of Korea), inciting anxiety and panic in Japan.

The DPRK's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was the beginning of a process which would lead to the Six Party Talks. As the DPRK showed efforts at drawing down its uranium reserves in the spring of 2008, the Egyptian telecom the Oruscom Group began the first part of its \$500 million investment in the DPRK. Orascom Group purchased a 50 per cent share in the DPRK state owned enterprise, the Sangwon Concrete Company. In April 2008, foreigners based in Pyongyang could see that workers had installed fiber optic cable and antennae to the top floors of the Ryugyong Hotel.

Could Kim Jong Il be readying a centenary anniversary gift for 2012, by giving his late father a cell phone tower?

## RESOURCES

There are few academic or objective texts in English on the history, geography and culture of the DPRK. Most of the literature on the DPRK or the Kim Family is aimed at an audience already conversant on Korean issues, or its focus is for specialists and practitioners on non-proliferation, military policy and planning or economics.

The generalist might seek out two texts that will provide excellent background on the DPRK. Robert Willoughby has written the only travel guide, *North Korea: The Bradt Travel Guide* (New York: Bradt Travel Guides, 2003). Former State Department weapons expert and Korea expert, Dr. Ken Quinones co-authored with Joseph Trager, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding North Korea* (New York: Alpha, 2004). Despite the title, Dr. Quinones and Mr. Trager have made an invaluable contribution to DPRK studies with this text; this would serve as the ideal text for undergraduates in a seminar on the DPRK, Korean Studies, or East Asian political affairs.

The best book on Kim Il Sung, and indeed the Kim Family, is Dae Sook Suh's *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; revised 1995). This is an excellent, objective history of President Kim and the KWP regime. One might also stimulate their curiosity with *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004) by Bradley Martin. Mr. Martin has conducted excellent research and indulges the reader's voyeurism by taking us into the Kim's personal lives and into their luxurious villas. Despite the research and quality of the writing, this is not a serious book. Any shape of a narrative falls apart and the reader is too often diverted from the biography into irrelevant anecdotes from Mr. Martin's human sources. Mr. Martin does not like the Kim Family or the DPRK and his human sources are too often North Korean defectors, a problematic group, living in Seoul.

To see an open-source satellite map of the DPRK, with detailed explanations and photographs of places and locales go to:  
(<http://wikimapia.org/#lat=39.436193&lon=126.5844727&z=8&l=0&m=a&v=2>)

To see a digital film of the Ryugyong Hotel in 2006 go to  
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r0FM31BXKK>)

To see a DPRK propaganda film about General Kim Jong il's role in the design and construction of Pyongyang in 1980-1982 go to  
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzBRKqz3a0>)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Michael Madden** studied writing with Stratis Haviaras and Larry Heinemann, and spent several years under the tutelage of Christopher Ricks. He is currently working on a satellite map of Pyongyang during Japan's annexation of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945. Mr. Madden is a member of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. He works in the Office of the Dean, College of Arts & Sciences, at Suffolk University in Boston, Massachusetts.

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