

Survivalist North Korea's Selective Tourism Development*

Kim Jong Un's Leadership Legitimacy

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From 2012 up until the COVID-19 outbreak and the country's border closure in January 2020, North Korea pursued development of a tourism industry on levels unlike before despite perceived 'threats' — ideological and political — that international tourism opening purportedly poses to a socialist system. For autarkic, atomized, isolationist, hyper-security conscious and heavily sanctioned post-totalitarian North Korea, tourism development surprisingly functions to maintain rather than subvert the Kim-family system. More than merely a coping mechanism, I hypothesize tourism development's multifaceted use under the Kim Jong Un regime. Externally, it served the regime as an instrument to indirectly engage the United States and pursue selective cooperation with North Korea's powerful neighbor, China, not only to generate foreign exchange amid robust international sanctions but also to reconnect (on Pyongyang's own terms) and revivify relations with its key patron in times of growing economic and geopolitical uncertainty; internally, it acted as a legitimacy-enhancing mechanism for the young hereditary successor (by way of particularistic narratives and performance rationales), as tourism development is linked to legacy politics and the long-term leadership desire to build a North Korean-style modern and cultured socialist civilization.

Keywords: authoritarian systems, North Korea, Kim Jong Un, tourism development, leadership legitimacy

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1. Introduction

For a tightly closed, totalitarian/early post-totalitarian system¹⁾ under a highly personalist dictatorship,²⁾ tourism can be seen as a type of Pandora's Box that, if opened, would threaten the state's socialist system rather than promote socioeconomic stability. In the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), this was seemingly the belief during founding leader Kim Il Sung's rule (1948–1994)³⁾ and to a large extent the reign of successor Kim Jong Il (1994–2011),⁴⁾ with the government's central economic planning, autarkic strategies, lack of political will for economic opening and reform, and geopolitical tensions in the region having long limited the scope of North Korea's ability to attract foreign investment and currencies through tourism projects. Yet early in the era of incumbent hereditary successor Kim Jong Un (2012–present), North Korea astonishingly

1) Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 42–51.

2) Wongjung Song and Joseph Wright, "The North Korean Autocracy in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 18 (2018), pp. 157–180.

3) For the English spellings of proper nouns (names of people, places, organizations, etc.) of North Korean origin, this study defers to the North Korean rendering of names.

4) For Kim Il Sung's and Kim Jong Il's views on tourism, see Dean J. Ouellette, *North Korean Tourism: Plans, Propaganda, People, Peace* (Seoul: IFES, 2017), chap. 2; and Dean J. Ouellette, "Understanding the 'Socialist Tourism' of North Korea Under Kim Jong Un: An Analysis of North Korean Discourse," *North Korean Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2020), pp. 55–81.

embraced tourism development, with the young sovereign investing resources (i.e., manpower, materials, and money) heavily into this sector, opening more locations of tourism development, making on-the-spot guidance trips to major project construction sites, and even allowing open academic discussion on the subject — all significant signs of the emergence of tourism as a leadership and national priority. Why this curious change under Kim Jong Un, whose youth, inexperience, and education immediately led many pundits to question his leadership ascension and staying power?⁵⁾

Studies on North Korea's tourism have long noted facets of 'Stalinism' in its tourism administration, structure, and content; link to socio-cultural and political-economic assets both tangible (i.e., hard currency revenues) and ideational (i.e., prestige, national identity)⁶⁾; and potential to aid national development.⁷⁾ Some scholars emphasize tourism's geopolitical functions in Pyongyang's "construction, perseverance and performance" of a "theatre-state."⁸⁾ Since Kim Jong

5) For an illustrative case, see Max Fisher, "What If Kim Jong Il's Successor Isn't Ready?" *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2011.

6) Derek R. Hall, "Stalinism and Tourism: A Study of Albania and North Korea," *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 17 (1990), pp. 36-54; Joan C. Henderson, "Communism, Heritage and Tourism in East Asia," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2007), pp. 240-254.

7) UN WTO, "Tourism Action Plan: Assistance on Tourism Development and Training, Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (DRK/90/005) (Madrid, 1994).

8) John Connell, "Tourism as Political Theatre in North Korea," *Political Geography*, Vol. 68 (2019), pp. 34-45; see also Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan

Un's rise to power, observers identify the utilization of tourism development as a means for Kim's regime to earn much needed foreign currency⁹⁾ and recognize its link to the facilitation of economic development in part through connection with Kim's highly publicized leader-led modernization projects (beyond Pyongyang in urban settings such as Wonsan, Samjiyon, Sinuiju, and rural Yangdok County) and special economic development zones policies.¹⁰⁾ Tourism development (together

Press, 2010), chap. 6.

- 9) Jiyeon Kim, Pilsoo Choi, Minkyung Lim, and Seung Kwon Na, "Cooperation between North Korea and China in Tourism and Policy Implication," KEIP Policy References 13-11 (2013); Ramon Pacheco Pardo, "North Korea: Northeast Asia's New Tourism Hub?" 38 North, September 4, 2014; Tim Beal, "From Pilgrimage to Profit: N. Korea's Search for Tourism Revenue," NK News, August 26, 2015; Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Touts New Resort, Seeking to Blunt U. N. Sanctions," *New York Times*, December 3, 2019.
- 10) Andray Abrahamian, "Developments and Prospects in Some of DPRK's Main Economic Development Zones, 2015-2016," *Korean Journal of Unification Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2015), pp. 275-290; In Joo Yoon, "North Korea's Tourism Industry in the Kim Jong-un Era: Evaluation and Prospects," *North Korean Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2015), pp. 93-123 (in Korean); Heejin Park, "The Kim Jung-un Regime's Cities and City Construction: Openness, Tourism, Commercialization," *Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2015), pp. 155-179 (in Korean); Eul-chul Lim, Dong-seok Jang, and Kye-Sung Ko, *Understanding North Korean Tourism* (Seoul: Daewangsa, 2017, in Korean), pp. 25-30; Theo Clement, "Between Economic Reform and Support of an 'Independent National Economy': Special Economic Zones in North Korea," *North Korean Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2020), pp. 27-54; Haejung Lee, Seonghwan Kim, and Seonghyeon Kang, *The Trends of North Korean Tourism Policy and the Implications for Inter-Korean Cooperation*, Strategic Regions In-depth Research 19-06 (Seoul: Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, 2020) (in Korean); Yeon-Sun Yoon, Young-Duk Kim, Dong-Han

with sports) is also bonded to Kim Jong Un's image branding¹¹⁾ and linked to nation branding via cultural spectacles.¹²⁾ It is also intertwined with inter-Korean relations and high politics due to past projects involving South Korean investment and exchanges in the Mt. Kumgang tourist zone, inter alia.¹³⁾ Due to the leadership priority to foster tourism, the associated North Korean academic research increased exponentially,¹⁴⁾ even articulating the country's tourism (and leisure) development under the rubric 'socialist tourism' (*saheojiuigwangwangeop*), thus setting Kim's development efforts apart from that of his predecessors and capitalist societies. All these indicate tourism's external and internal dimensions and complexity, including connection to power politics, social construction, regime legacy, and performance legitimacy.

How has tourism served the young hereditary successor over the past ten years of his rule? In this study I illuminate some of this complexity

Shin, and Yong-Hyun Kim, "A Study on the Characteristics and Limitations of Special Tourist Zones in North Korea in the Kim Jong Un Era," *Tourism Research*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2021), pp. 241-261 (in Korean).

11) Yoo Suk Jung and Eun Kyung Kwak, "North Korea's Symbolic Politics as Shown in Kim Jong Un's On-the-Spot Guidance," *Review of North Korean Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2015), pp. 156-224 (in Korean).

12) E. J. R. Cho, "Nation Branding for Survival in North Korea: The Arirang Festival and Nuclear Weapons Tests," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2017), pp. 594-622.

13) For background on the inter-Korean tourism plans and projects, see Lim, Jang, and Ko, *Understanding North Korean Tourism* (2017), chap. 4.

14) For discussion, see Ouellette, "Understanding the 'Socialist Tourism'" (2020); Lee, Kim, and Kang, *The Trends* (2020), chap. 2.

through examination¹⁵⁾ of the changing North Korean milieu, with a focus on external environment and internal situation. More than just a coping mechanism for the regime to earn foreign currency under a severely sanctioned economy, I argue that tourism development is a strategic choice of the Kim Jong Un regime that functions in multifarious ways including as an external policy response to North Korea's powerful neighbors — that is, the United States, but especially the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China), allowing North Korea to cooperate selectively and reconnect deferentially with Beijing; and as an internal policy choice to provide Kim a connection to legacy and mechanism of legitimation while pursuing a broad long-term strategy for construction of a modern 'socialist civilization', ostensibly signaling to his people a move away from economic hardship and toward a leisure society. Facets of tourism's utility and instrumentality are highlighted, suggesting that despite past apprehensions, the tourism development and limited opening as pursued by Kim Jong Un has yielded him notable benefits — or at least did until the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020 — without threatening significantly the regime's imperium or system's survivability.

15) Examination based on analysis of North Korean materials, scholarly literature, media sources, as well as the author's own discussions with international tourism professionals and observations during several trips to the country.

2. Explaining Kim Jong Un's Tourism Development

1) Background: Tourism Type and Predecessors' Perceptions

Tourism development in North Korea has long been shaped by its political ideologies.¹⁶⁾ The business of tourism has always been a rigidly prepared, inflexible political affair, constituting 'theatre': "All tourism in North Korea constitutes theatre... all tourism sites and performances ... connect tourism to political goals and highlights its potential role in imagining, shaping and narrating the national past, present and future, as a highly visual part of soft power and public diplomacy."¹⁷⁾ As in other (former) communist states, North Korea's tourism development program appears subordinated to what Derek Hall calls 'Stalinist' economic priorities of a socialist development strategy, the policies of which comprise several conditions such as seeking the equal distribution of goods, catalyzing improvements in economic performance and rapid development, leading infrastructural improvements that benefit the domestic population more than foreign

16) Joan C. Henderson, "Tourism and Politics in the Korean Peninsula," *Journal of Tourism Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), pp. 16-27; Samuel Kim, Dallen J. Timothy, and Hag-Chin Han, "Tourism and Political Ideologies: A Case of Tourism in North Korea," *Tourism Management*, Vol. 28 (2007), pp. 1031-1043; Y. Wang, A. M. Van Broeck, and D. Vanneste, "International Tourism in North Korea: How, Where and When Does Political Ideology Enter?" *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2017), pp. 260-272.

17) John Connell, "Tourism as Political Theatre" (2019), p. 35.

visitors, avoiding activities that harm the natural environment, obtaining foreign currency for possible use to purchase essential imports that improve the country's performance, precluding various foreign influences (i.e., ideological, cultural, and economic), promoting the state's perspective of international peace, imbuing visitors with a sense of socialism's superiority and the state's interpretation of socialist development, and projecting a constructed image of the host country.¹⁸⁾ Under Kim Jong Un, these conditions appear to have been simplified and reordered — at least academically — into five essential features / functions of a 'socialist tourism' program and policy for North Korea: in simple terms, those are 1) external propaganda; 2) promotion of national economic development (namely transportation, construction, agriculture and fisheries, and light industry sectors) in part through support of tourism's related services (lodgings, sightseeing, catering, entertainment, etc.); 3) contribution to satisfying people's material comforts and cultural living; 4) protection of the environment; and 5) securing of financial income that contributes to the 'national budget income guarantee'.¹⁹⁾

18) Hall, "Stalinism and Tourism" (1990), p. 38.

19) The quintessential essay on this is Chon Yong Myong, "Essential Features and Role of Socialist Tourism," *Journal of Kim Il Sung University: Philosophy, Economics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2015), pp. 65-68 (in Korean). Key texts — among others — in the expression of a North Korean 'socialist tourism' are Chon Yong Myong, "The Nature and Special Characteristics of Tourism Industry," *Journal of Kim Il Sung University: Philosophy, Economics*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2014), pp. 71-74 (in Korean); Choe Jae Duk, *Compendium of Economics Research 17: Tourism*

In the Kim Il Sung era during the Cold War, tourism functioned not as a matter of trade but primarily as a vehicle for propaganda to eulogize his exploits to convince fellow communist and friendly Third World non-aligned countries of North Korea's success as a model socialist state. By the time of Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, tourism was not seen as an important economic activity, as indicated by the low number of persons directly employed in the industry (only approximately 25,000 persons, which at the time was less than 1% of North Korea's total labor force).²⁰⁾ Neither Kim Il Sung nor Kim Jong Il had pursued robust tourism opening and development. Social mobility and increased contact with foreign tourists (by virtue of their influx) were deemed by both the former leaders as potential threats to the North Korean socialist system.²¹⁾ While some modest efforts were made to develop tourism, these efforts could be characterized as guarded, unsystematic, and detached from the national economy; rather, tourism has been foremost a device for propaganda. Likewise, tourism development did not feature prominently in the image branding of either leader, nor was it materially a vehicle of performance legitimation of the leaders, father or son.

Management Methodology(Pyongyang: Korea Social Science Publishing House, 2015) (in Korean); and Choe Jae Duk, "Tourism Demand and Leisure Time," *Economic Research*, Vol. 171, No. 2 (2016), pp. 37-38 (in Korean).

20) UN WTO, "Tourism Action Plan"(1994), p. 39.

21) For details on the former leaders' perceptions, instructions, and activities related to tourism, see Ouellette, *North Korean Tourism* (2017, chap. 2) and Ouellette, "Understanding the 'Socialist Tourism'" (2020).

2) The Successor: Performance Legitimacy as Analytical Lens

Studies on autocratic, authoritarian and totalitarian systems note that such regimes cannot rely entirely on repression and co-option for power but must develop legitimization among mechanisms such as indoctrination and propaganda, political and economic performance, passivity, nationalism, cultural values, and democratic-procedural legitimacy²²⁾ – some combination of elements of the Weberian “ideal types of dominations/authority” (i.e., traditional, charismatic, and legal/rational)²³⁾ – for both their internal and external legitimation strategies. In the case of North Korea, particularistic narratives (i.e., ideological indoctrination) have functioned as strong mechanisms of internal legitimation for founding leader Kim Il Sung,²⁴⁾ and to a significant degree for his successor and son Kim Jong Il.²⁵⁾ However, in

22) Alexander Dukalskis and Johannes Gerschkeski, “What Autocracies Say (and What Citizens Hear): Proposing Four Mechanisms of Autocratic Legitimation,” *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2017), pp. 251-268; Andrew J. Nathan, “The Puzzle of Authoritarian Legitimacy,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2020), pp. 158-168.

23) Ivan Szelenyi, “Weber’s Theory of Domination and Post-Communist Capitalism,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2016), pp. 1-24.

24) Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), pp. 1-10.

25) See the chapter “Psychological Warfare” in Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader*, trans. by Shirley Lee (New York: Atria, 2014), pp. 3-24; and Andrew Scobell, “Kim Jong Il and North Korea: The Leader and the System” (Monograph, US Army War College, 2006), pp. vi-vii, 28, 38.

their study on succession of power from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un, Frank and Park argue from a Weberian perspective that the existent ruling system's perpetuation "necessitates a separation of legitimacy and actual rule," whereby the "core mechanism of creating legitimacy . . . are performance based," as opposed to the procedural-virtues based legitimacy.²⁶⁾ This makes sense, because even if Kim Jong Un's position at the apex of North Korea's 'monolithic system /*suryong* (leader) regime' provides him a strong source of power, "the stability of power cannot be infinitely guaranteed if the surrounding environment deteriorates and the ruler's leadership is weak . . . if [the leader] fails to direct the state toward survival and development by adapting quickly to the ever-changing environment and challenges . . . then the regime could face huge risks."²⁷⁾ Assenting to such assessments, any study – including this one – of Kim Jong Un's policy choices should then analytically consider performance-related rationales as a pathway of legitimation. As shall be discussed, for Kim, tourism development is a correlate mechanism of his performance legitimation.

26) Rudiger Frank and Phillip H. Park, "From Monolithic Totalitarian to Collective Authoritarian Leadership? Performance-Based Legitimacy and Power Transfer in North Korea," *North Korean Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2012), pp. 33-34.

27) Jong-seok Lee, "The Kim Jong Un Regime: Practical and Sustainable," *Global Asia*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2021), pp. 8-13.

3) The Hereditary Successor's World: External and Internal Milieux, Concerns of Legitimacy

Compared to his predecessors, Kim Jong Un has embraced a robust tourism development. Aspects of this in terms of physical infrastructure, foreign direct investments, SEZs policy, location access, product innovation, marketing and promotion, and so forth have been widely reported.²⁸⁾ By way of comparison, Table 1 provides a general overview by leadership era of the continuity and changes in North Korea's tourism policy and practice, type, target audiences and promotion, policy and planning, as well as influential aspects of the country's internal and external milieux.

Kim inherited a different North Korea and external environment compared to when his father succeeded to the helm of supreme power. Externally, an environment where political tensions with South Korea, Japan, and the United States were high, exchanges curtailed severely, and trade limited significantly due to international sanctions. But since 2009, relations with China had improved. Political tensions had been reduced despite North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, withdrawal from the Chinese-mediated six-party denuclearization talks, and belligerent military provocations against South Korea in 2010 (i.e., ROKS Cheonan sinking and Yeongpyeong Island bombardment). Also, the

28) Yoon, "North Korea's Tourism" (2015); Ouellette, *North Korean Tourism* (2017); Lim, Jang, and Ko, *Understanding North Korean Tourism* (2017); Lee, Kim, and Kang, *The Trends* (2020).

(Table 1) Tourism in North Korea: Comparison of
Kim Il Sung & Kim Jong Il Eras vs Kim Jong Un Era

	Tourism in Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il eras	Tourism in Kim Jong Un era
Policy & Practice	- fixed itineraries; separation of domestic citizens and foreigners, but dual use of tourism (hospitality) facilities	- fixed itineraries; mostly separation of citizens and foreign visitors; dual use facilities; increase in tourism/hospitality workforce, locations, sites, and therefore slight increase in interactions with domestic population (i.e., service workers, school children, factory workers, domestic tourists, etc.)
Type of tourism / Content of attractions	- heritage ('revolutionary' history and culture), political, nature tourism	- predominately heritage ('revolutionary' history and culture), political, nature tourism; but also emergent leisure (sports and recreation activities, special events entertainment), wellness & medical, culinary, educational tourism
Target market & Advertising promotion	- mostly friendly socialist and non-aligned countries; Chinese - limited advertising or promotion	- mostly Chinese, but also Southeast Asian, European, North American - active promotion and marketing (by DPRK offices abroad, websites, and some domestic entities, but especially by partner international travel companies); emergence of advertising toward domestic tourists
Priorities, Plans, Purposes	- not a leadership priority; nascent development; Pyongyang-focused; piecemeal planning; promote nationalist agenda; not viewed as part of the national economy and of tertiary concern for experimental SEZs (e.g., 1984 Joint Venture law, Rason SEZ, Mt. Kumgang/Kaesong tourism [inter-Korean, until mid-2008], Sinuiju SAR [abandoned project])	- leadership priority; incorporated in national plans for building independent economy (i.e. via EDZs/SEZs policy); linked to leader's image branding, sports & national identity, country's image makeover (as a modern, 'normal state'), and leadership legacy; increased and active development of tourism/hospitality facilities and related manpower resources; development beyond Pyongyang into cities such as Wonsan, Samjiyon (Mt. Paektu), Sinuiju, several EDZs, and rural areas such as Masik Pass (ski resort), Yangdok County (hot springs), etc.
Milieux (internal / external environment)	- Cold War, nascent tourism planning (1980s-1990s); Socialist bloc dis-integrates; 1st hereditary leadership succession; economic collapse and famine ('Arduous March' period); Songun ('military-first') politics; nascent bottom-up marketization; inter-Korean rapprochement → Mt. Kumgang tourism project → suspension of inter-Korean tourism (July 2008); no Approved Destination Status (ADS) by China (until 2010); strained PRC-DPRK relations; developing/rising China, US global hegemony, multilateral denuclearization talks (e.g., Six-Party Talks), etc.; antagonistic inter-Korean relations, then better relations under the ROK 'Sunshine' engagement policy (1998-2008)	- stabilizing domestic economy (decade after 'Arduous March' period) with bottom-up marketization expansion/second economy; 2nd hereditary leadership succession; reinstating Party control over the state; shifting leadership emphasis from military/security focus toward economic development and modernization; enjoy ADS status and increased flow and spending power of Chinese tourists; growing links with international travel agencies, and their use of social media platforms to promote tourism and country image to international tourists separate from mainstream media; strained relations and unclear DPRK policy toward China (until 2018); assertively rising China, perceived decline in US hegemony over the region, and increasing US-China rivalry, with prolonged suspension of denuclearization negotiations; frozen inter-Korean relations (2009-2017), brief warming period (2018), then frozen relations (2019-2021)

Source: author's compilation.

economic relationship began to deepen (mainly commercially) as China had for the past decade taken a “minimal approach” to interpreting and enforcing UN resolutions involving sanctions, to a point where China began to dominate North Korea’s foreign trade and shape its troubled economy.²⁹⁾

Internally, too, the milieu was different. In brief, Kim Jong Un inherited a “fragile although stabilizing economy derailed from its historical central planning, advancing on a marketization-from-the-bottom-up phenomenon” that “spawned a capitalist class of entrepreneurs (i.e., the donju, or ‘money-makers’)” who as a class already held “substantial private capital outside the state-controlled mono-banking system.”³⁰⁾ He also inherited “a society . . . just over a decade removed from experiencing widespread famine and now aware through illicit, incidental, and tacit information flows of the prosperity of its once destitute neighbor China and rival South Korea,” and perhaps most significantly “a younger generation with a greater sense of individualism, materialism, and curiosity and thus less committed to the traditional socialist ideals.”³¹⁾

With such external environment and domestic situation, unlike Kim Jong Il who gained legitimacy through particularist narratives, Kim Jong Un would not be able to rely simply on his bloodline and the legacies set before him by his widely revered grandfather and less-than

29) Daniel Wertz, “China-North Korea Relations,” NCNK, November 2019.

30) Ouellette, “Understanding the ‘Socialist Tourism’” (2020), p. 57.

31) *Ibid.*

charismatic but politically-proven father. Instead, he would need to connect to them vigorously, and demonstrate an element of ‘performance’. Tourism development would become intertwined in this pursuit, both externally and internally.

4) Connect to Legacy, Show Performance

In 1982 and 1989, Kim Il Sung spoke about developing Wonsan into an international city of tourism and recreation, at the time also stating that, unfortunately, the North Korean people themselves were too busy laboring to rebuild the country to be able to enjoy such leisure. Kim Il Sung also commented several times (in 1985, 1988, 1989, and 1991) about building up the tourism sites, infrastructure, and services in and around Mt. Paektu — considered the ancestral birthplace of the Korean people — so that visitors could celebrate Korea’s ‘revolutionary’ history and traditions.³²⁾ For North Korea, the mountain is celebrated as sacred land where the Korean revolution and (according to his official biography) Kim Jong Il were birthed.

So early in his rule, Kim Jong Un underscored his bloodline connection to the legacies of his forefathers in several critical talks/letters meant to provoke senior party and army officials, the youth of the elite, all members of the Socialist Youth League, and national

32) Ouellette, *North Korean Tourism* (2017) and “Understanding the ‘Socialist Tourism’” (2020).

heritage conservation authorities (who are responsible for, provide unified guidance on, and deliberate the selection of all heritage-related tourism sites for the country) to “staunchly carry forward . . . the lineage of Paektu,” “build a powerful Paektusan nation,” pay tribute to “the peerlessly great persons of Mt. Paektu,” and “live and work in the revolutionary spirit of Paektu, the spirit of the blizzards of Paektu.”³³⁾ Supposedly millions of North Koreans make the pilgrimage to Mt. Paektu every year, which conveys the lands’ importance to the Kim leadership.³⁴⁾ Thus tourism development — among other urban renovations — in both these areas is thus connected to and connects Kim Jong Un to the legacy of his forefathers. To fully realize this legacy, however, would require

33) Kim Jong Un, “The Sons and Daughters of Revolutionary Martyrs Should Become the Backbone of the Songun Revolution and the Reliable Heirs of the Lineage of Mangyongdae, the Lineage of Paektu: Letter to the Teaching Staff and Students of Mangyongdae Revolutionary School and Kang Pan Sok Revolutionary School on the 65th Anniversary of the Schools’ Founding,” October 12, 2012; Kim Jong Un, “Young People, Be Vanguard Fighters Who Are Unfailingly Faithful to the Party’s Revolutionary Cause of Songun: Letter to Those Attending the Fourth Conference of Primary Officials of Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League,” September 18, 2014; Kim Jong Un, “National Heritage Conservation Is a Patriotic Undertaking for Adding Brilliance to the History and Traditions of Our Nation: Talk to Senior Officials of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea,” October 24, 2014; Kim Jong Un, “Let Us Live and Work in the Revolutionary Spirit of Paektu, the Spirit of the Blizzards of Paektu: Talk to Senior officials of the Party and the Army,” October 27, 2014.

34) DPRK reported two million North Koreans visited the mountain in 2006. Yonsan Ahn, “China and the Two Koreas Clash Over Mount Paekdu / Changbai: Memory Wars Threaten Regional Accommodation,” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (2007).

performance: that means actually physically developing both Wonsan and Samjiyon/Mt. Paektu, the former as a ‘pleasure resort’/paradise and the latter as a site for ‘revolutionary’ heritage, for international and domestic visitors alike.

There is one other crucial element to Mt. Paektu. While Wonsan is fully within DPRK territory, Mt. Paektu is not, but rather straddles the border with China, where it is known as Mt. Changbai. In the mid-2000s, China made aggressive moves to revitalize tourism area on its side of the border, claim the mountain as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and even pitch the area as a venue for use in China’s Winter Olympics bid, inter alia. This revealed Beijing’s efforts to lay claim to this mountain as an exclusive Chinese landmark, thereby reigniting China-Korea “history wars.”³⁵⁾ The mountain has economic, strategic, and historical value for the Chinese.³⁶⁾ But in the eyes of the North Korean people, what kind of hereditary successor would Kim Jong Un be if he could not save the birthplace of his father, of the Korean revolution, from being culturally appropriated by its communist neighbor? Thus building up tourism in the Mt. Paektu/Samjiyon region, its heritage sites, became important politically, economically, culturally, and ethnically for North Korea, to protect the legacy/legitimation of the Kim-family regime.

35) China even went so far as to order the closure (on the Chinese side) of four South Korean - run hotels and one run by a North Korean - affiliated resident of Japan. *Ibid.*

36) *Ibid.*

From a propaganda perspective, renovating and expanding the winter sports and leisure facilities in Mt. Paektu becomes important not only for propaganda toward the domestic masses, but also for external publicity: while attracting Chinese tourists to ski, trek, and lodge at Mt. Paektu to gain tourist receipts is one purpose of the tourism development/expansion, reminding the ‘frenemy’ neighbors who these sacred lands belong to is likely equally if not more vital for Kim.

5) Tourism’s Link to External Policy: Diplomacy . . . with Great Powers?

From one perspective, tourism has played a unique role in Kim Jong Un’s diplomacy by launching, differentiating, and punctuating his foreign diplomacy with the world’s two greatest powers, the United States (archenemy) and China (patron and ally).

(1) Sports Diplomacy with the US?

In the January 2014 issue of *Kulloja*, the monthly publication of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, well-known and influential North Korean diplomat Kang Sok Ju published an article on Kim Jong Un’s influential role in DPRK foreign diplomacy despite Kim’s lack of opportunities to engage in international activities.³⁷⁾

37) Kang Sok Ju, “Peerless Great Man Who Moves the Masses Through Their Foreign Activities,” *Kulloja*, January 2014. Found in Atsuhito Isozaki, *Understanding the North Korean Regime* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2017), pp. 28-29.

Indeed, since coming to power in December 2011, Kim had not met any foreign leaders nor had he traveled abroad – a fact that would not change until March 2018 when Kim met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping (which will be discussed below). Nevertheless, the one opportunity that Kim himself arranged to engage in a type of international activity was his invitation and meeting with US professional basketball legend Dennis Rodman, who made several trips to North Korea where he famously met Kim in February and September 2013 and January 2014, with Kim expressing to Rodman his hope that the basketball exhibition games and the visits would help improve North Korean-American relations. Rodman himself (and Western media) characterized his visits as a type of ‘sports diplomacy’ to “broker peace” between the US and DPRK.³⁸⁾

For purpose of comparison, it is worthwhile noting Kim Jong Il’s major tourism-related event and foray into international sports diplomacy with North Korea’s enemies. Soon after taking the de facto reins of power, and less than a year after President Jimmy Carter’s surprise visit to Pyongyang to defuse the first North Korean nuclear crisis (June 1994), Kim Il Sung’s death (July 1994), and then vice-foreign minister Kang Sok Ju’s months-long efforts to negotiate the Geneva Agreed Framework (October 1994), in April 1995 Kim Jong Il hosted the Pyongyang International Sports and Cultural Festival for Peace.

38) Lynn Zinser, “Rodman Meets with North Korean Leader, Courtside,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2013; Anna Fifield, “Dennis Rodman Returns from North Korea. And, Amazingly, Nothing Happened,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2017.

Dubbed by the Western media as ‘Collision in Korea’, this unprecedented event featured famous American and Japanese male and female wrestlers, and retired boxer Muhammed Ali as the guest of honor, for a two-day wrestling extravaganza, which boasted the largest combined attendance (estimated 360,000 people, overwhelmingly North Koreans) of any wrestling event in the history of the sport.³⁹⁾ However, it was not the brainchild of Kim Jong Il, but the offer and design of a Japanese sportsman, Antonio Inoki, looking to revitalize his political career, and was jointly produced by Japanese and US professional wrestling as a pay-per-view production.

Kim Jong Un’s sports diplomacy was not a one-time event, and it is unlikely that Rodman’s visit would have transpired if not for Kim’s love of basketball and the Chicago Bulls, and his focus on tourism development and expansion. Americans themselves were not granted tourist visas to travel to the DPRK until 2010 (unless to attend the annual ‘Mass Games’), making it no surprise that less than 2,500 US citizens had visited North Korea from after the Korean War in 1953 to December 2009.⁴⁰⁾

39) Javier Ojst, “Collision in Korea – Wrestling’s Bizarre Political Game in a Land of War,” *Prowrestlingstories.com*, n.d.; Dan Greene, “Oral History of Pro Wrestling’s 1995 Historic Excursion into North Korea,” *Sports Illustrated.com*, April 27, 2015.

40) Chris Anderson, “Visit Anytime! North Korea Lifts Restrictions on U.S. Tourists,” *CNN International*, January 15, 2010.

(2) High Politics with China

With respect to China, North Korea's tourism development seems fairly obvious from a market standpoint. Since 1994, Chinese tourists have been identified as the leading source market and market with greatest potential, making up the majority of tourist receipts.⁴¹⁾ This has not changed in the Kim Jong Un era, and North Korea has been doing more to attract Chinese tourists.⁴²⁾

But the intricacies are deeper. From the beginning and throughout

41) In 1992, North Korea recorded 117,487 international arrivals, 82,536 of which were from China. UN WTO, *Tourism Action Plan* (1994), pp. 59-62.

42) According to China National Tourism Administration, 237,000 Chinese visited North Korea in 2012, with estimates suggesting earnings of as much as USD34.6 million. In 2013, China stopped publishing numbers of its outbound tourists to the DPRK. However, conservative estimates suggest that in 2014 North Korea received 95,000 Chinese tourists and earned as much as USD43 million from its total tourism income; in 2018, it has been reported that anywhere between 195,000 to 1.2 million Chinese tourists entered the country, with total earnings being as much as USD360 million; media reports suggest that in 2019 as many as 345,000 Chinese tourists visited, with earnings from the Chinese market alone being as much as USD175 million. See Yoon, "North Korea's Tourism Industry" (2015); Mun Dong Hui, "Tourists Now Required to Pay Upfront for North Korea's Mass Games," Daily NK, June 3, 2019; and Chad O'Carroll, "As Chinese Tourism to North Korea Soars Local Operators Feel the Strain," NK News, October 31, 2019. Over the last decade, North Korea has been doing more on its websites and Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo to draw interest. Whether or not their marketing is capable of meeting Chinese consumer demands and trends is another story. According to one source, Chinese tourists have become savvier, and look for more in their overseas tour destinations. Jessica Kelly, "How to Delight & Attract the New Chinese Tourist (2019)," Dragon Social, July 23, 2019.

Kim's leadership, diplomatic overtures toward China were also a feature of the cultural productions closely connected to the tourism industry. The iconic 'Mass Games' in 2012 and 2013 paid tribute to Chinese communism under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Performances were canceled after 2013, yet reintroduced in June 2018, with the similar tribute paid, and in 2019 the mass games ran for four months over the summer season and at least once included a tribute to Chinese leader Xi Jinping.⁴³⁾ All Chinese tourists traveling in those months reportedly had to purchase tickets to the games in order to receive their travel visa.⁴⁴⁾ In a sense, such manipulation transformed this iconic event for promoting national identity, political socialization, and nation branding into a tourism product for Chinese tourists' consumption, with Chinese tourists' satisfaction with tours to Pyongyang having grown somewhat in the 2010s⁴⁵⁾ and their impact on

43) Of note is that in late 2018, the Mass Games were also used in the diplomatic sense for Kim to curry favor with Cuba and its new leader, President Miguel Díaz-Canel, during the latter's visit to the DPRK, as Díaz-Canel was bid farewell with a mass gymnastics performance in which images of Fidel Castro with Kim Il Sung, Raúl Castro with Kim Jong Il, and himself (Díaz-Canel) with Kim Jong Un were projected. Remarks made by President Miguel Díaz-Canel during his official visit to the DPRK in November 2018, *Representaciones Diplomáticas de Cuba en El Exterior*, "Díaz-Canel: Relations between Cuba and the DPRK are historic, and based on mutual respect," *Granma*, November 13, 2018.

44) Mun Dong Hui, "Tourists Now Required to Pay" (2019).

45) Kim Han Kyu, "Chinese Tourists' Satisfaction with Pyongyang Tourism: Evaluation of the Ctrip Portal," *Review of North Korean Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2020), pp. 179-219 (in Korean).

North Korea economically, politically, and socially having grown as well.⁴⁶⁾

But tourism was also tied to the high-level external strategies of Kim, as suggested by the nuclear brinksmanship, charm diplomacy surrounding the South Korean Winter Olympics in 2018, and out-of-the-blue high-level summitry with Xi Jinping to repair the Sino-DPRK relations.

It is no secret that from the beginning of Kim Jong Un's rule in 2012 up until spring 2018, ties between Kim and Xi Jinping, who became paramount leader of China in November 2012, were becoming increasingly strained. By the end of 2017, relations were reportedly "worse than ever."⁴⁷⁾ In attempts to deter North Korea from conducting a sixth nuclear test, China suspended sales of Chinese group tours to the DPRK in April 2017.⁴⁸⁾ After North Korea's ballistic missile test in July 2017 and sixth nuclear test in September 2017 — the latter occurring on the same day Xi delivered a speech at the opening ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum — Beijing signaled its exasperation with the Kim regime by agreeing to much harsher international sanctions against the DPRK, embodied in UNSC Resolutions 2375 and 2397, passed on September 11 and December 22,

46) Chad O'Carroll, "How a Massive Influx of Chinese Visitors Is Changing North Korean Tourism," NK News, November 1, 2019.

47) Jaeho Hwang, "China's Policy Towards North Korea in Xi Jinping's Second Term," *Korean Journal of Security Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2019), p. 75.

48) Arirang, "Chinese Travel Agencies Suspend Sales of Tour Packages to N. Korea," April 17, 2017.

2017, respectively. These included the ban and return of North Korean nationals earning an income by working abroad, whose number was estimated in 2017 to be nearly 100,000 – of which as many as 80,000 were working in China, some in the tourism hospitality field – netting the regime over US\$500 million per year.⁴⁹⁾ In November 2017, China also unofficially had its tour operators halt all trips to Pyongyang, permitting them only to offer one-day tours to Sinuiju.⁵⁰⁾ As Hwang notes, since 2012, Xi Jinping had been enraged at how Pyongyang never consulted Beijing beforehand about North Korea’s missile or nuclear tests nor offered explanations afterward to China, demonstrating blatant disregard for Chinese interests.⁵¹⁾ Under Kim, North Korea systematically marginalized Chinese requests, and Pyongyang’s adventurism was beginning to be viewed as hijacking China’s policy globally and regionally and jeopardizing regional stability. At this point, within the CCP, members were more critical of North Korea’s behavior, and more skeptical about their own policy toward the DPRK: As one Chinese expert stated, “If our only ally is disrespecting us, how are we to expect Vietnam, or Malaysia, to respect us?”⁵²⁾

49) United States Mission to the United Nations, “Fact Sheet: UN Security Council Resolution 2397 on North Korea,” December 22, 2017.

50) Sue-Lin Wong and James Pearson, “Exclusive: China Curbs Tourism to North Korea Ahead of Trump Visit – Sources,” Reuters, November 7, 2017.

51) Jaeho Hwang, “China Policy” (2019), p. 75.

52) Comment by Odd Aren Westad, seminar at IFES, Kyungnam University, Seoul, Korea, May 22, 2017.

Nevertheless, Kim Jong Un needed to repair the relationship with China in order to shift to his own policy that would emphasize domestic economic development, and ensure that Beijing would provide North Korea economic, ideological, and geostrategic support. The response from Pyongyang was a shift to charm diplomacy, which started strategically with Pyongyang doing a 180-degree turn in its relations with South Korea by agreeing to send athletes to participate in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in February 2018, with Kim Jong Un sending his own sister, Kim Yo Jong, as part of a high-level delegation to visit the South. Behind the scenes negotiations between the two Koreas revealed an agreement for a Moon Jae-in–Kim Jong Un meeting (a third ever ROK-DPRK summit), and then astonishingly a possible Donald Trump–Kim Jong Un meeting, or in other words, a historic first US-DPRK summit. In one respect, this appears a calculated plan to woo Beijing to agree to begin to reconcile the previous six years of lukewarm Sino-DPRK relations and repair the fractured relationship between Chinese elite (within the CCP) and North Korean leadership (Workers’ Party of Korea, WPK). Why? So that Kim Jong Un could shift more fully toward economic development and modernization on a national level, as later expressed by Kim in a speech in April 2018⁵³) — a shift that would be welcomed by leaders in Beijing, and one that would seemingly benefit North Korea’s tourism development in terms

53) “Third Plenary Meeting of Seventh C.C., WPK Held in Presence of Kim Jong Un,” KCNA, April 21, 2018.

of manpower and material resources for physical infrastructure, which Kim dispatched for Wonsan in 2018 and 2019, and possibly in terms of tourist arrivals, as new aviation routes from Chengdu and Xian to Pyongyang were set to open in June and July 2018.⁵⁴⁾ As one scholar argues, “Kim Jong Un’s desire to consolidate his regime’s legitimacy through economic development after completing his preeminent goal of becoming a nuclear power is a driving force in Pyongyang’s sudden turn in diplomacy in 2018.”⁵⁵⁾ But North Korea would not beg. China would be required to demonstrate their respect and treat the young DPRK leader as an equal. How? By agreeing to a summit between leaders, which Xi had up until then not agreed to with Kim.

North Korea very well realizes the precarious situation — economically and security-wise — it will be in if it does not have China’s support. Pyongyang also is fully aware of China’s past suzerainty practices and present-day regional hegemonic aspirations under Xi. Because of this, reducing the tensions and reestablishing better relations with China would be necessary, and possible.

From 2011 to March 2018, Kim Jong Un had not held a summit with any world leader. And until spring 2018, the last time a high-ranking

54) Reportedly, after pressure from Washington, authorities in Beijing put a hold on these charter flights, and the new routes never materialized. “China May Slow Pace of Tourism Cooperation with N. Korea after U. S. Protest,” Yonhap News, July 2, 2018.

55) Min-hyung Kim, “If Not Maximum Pressure, Then What? Explaining North Korea’s Sudden Turn to Diplomacy and Its Implications for the U. S. - North Korean Nuclear Negotiations,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2020), pp. 293-310.

official from the CCP politburo had officially met Kim was October 2015 in Pyongyang.⁵⁶⁾ Kim Jong Un refused to meet Xi's special envoy Song Tao during Song's dispatch to Pyongyang in November 2017. The perception in Beijing was that Pyongyang had crossed a limit by creating chaos and thus was threatening China's core interests.⁵⁷⁾

Yet, in February 2018, Kim agreed to a summit with South Korean president Moon Jae-in, and by sheer chance, was gifted a possible summit with a standing US president, Donald Trump. While it appears China has long held the position that the problems of the two Koreas need to be solved by the Koreans themselves, and urges for talks between Seoul and Pyongyang as the means to build a foundation for peace on the Korean Peninsula, is there any way Beijing could allow Kim's first summit as a leader to be an inter-Korean one? Roughly two weeks after the announcement of a potential Moon-Kim summit and Trump's shocking statement (that he would meet Kim Jong Un), the North Korean leader was in Beijing shaking hands with every member of the CCP politburo, and eventually meeting Xi. With an inter-Korean summit and possibility of a DPRK-US summit on the horizon, Xi Jinping had no choice but to invite Kim for an 'unofficial' meeting yet de facto summit — because China's history and Xi's designs for regional hegemony demanded that the Chinese leader be the first to meet the leader

56) Adam Cathcart, "The New Normal: Liu Yunshan in Pyongyang," SinoNK, October 18, 2015. Liu Yunshan was no longer at Xi's disposal — or in his good graces — as Liu had 'retired' at the 19th Congress of the CCP in October 2017.

57) Eun A. Jo, "Limits of Chinese Patience Toward North Korea and Prospects of Chinese Cooperation with South Korea," Asan Forum, April 13, 2017.

of China's communist neighbor and only security ally.⁵⁸⁾

In the following months two more meetings between Kim and Xi took place in China (in May and June 2018), and Chinese tourist flows to North Korea began to soar, overwhelming North Korea's accommodations capacity.⁵⁹⁾ Most significantly, however, was in late April 2018, a North

58) Again by way of comparison, the ensuing summitry is reminiscent of the 1999–2000 Sino-DPRK high-level meetings, which began to repair the long strained ties between Beijing and Pyongyang. These began with a high-level DPRK delegation visiting China in June 1999 that led to a display of mutual goodwill and apparent reconciliation between Beijing and Pyongyang, and eventually was later capped off by Kim Jong Il's official visit (at Chinese president Jiang Zemin's invitation) to China in May 2000 (and again in January 2001)—Kim's first trip to China since becoming leader of North Korea, that is, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea and Chairman of the National Defence Commission, and his first trip in seventeen years on account of the estrangement between former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and Kim Jong Il—an estrangement widely believed to be on account of the 1983 Rangoon bombing that nearly killed then South Korean president Chun Do Hwan, but did kill 17 accompanying South Korean officials, an act of terrorism which Deng held Kim responsible for. Alvin Magid, "Contemplating Survivalist North Korea," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2000), pp. 119–121; Jonathan D. Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 90–91. Only years after Deng's death did Kim Jong Il visit China, its special economic zones, and make any attempt to draw in Chinese tourists by announcing the plans for a Sinuiju SAR and construction of a luxury hotel with western-style casino in Rajin-Sonbong SEZ, to be built with investment from Hong Kong, the latter (hotel) project which had the backing of Beijing. Xiaoxiong Yi, "Dynamics of China's South Korea Policy: Assertive Nationalism, Beijing's Changing Strategic Evaluation of the United States, and the North Korea Factor," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2000), p. 89.

59) Liu Caiyu, "NK 'Limits' Foreign Visitors as It Might Face Reception Problems

Korean tourist bus crashed, killing 33 Chinese tourists — a special tour believed to be organized by a brand new North Korean domestic travel company (Moranbong Travel Company) to promote DPRK sites to Beijing-based travel agents, who composed most of the group of that tour.⁶⁰⁾ Astonishingly, DPRK state media reported this tragic event and that Kim Jong Un expressed his “bitter sorrow” and “grief at the thought of the bereaved families who lost their blood relatives,” revealed pictures of his visit to the hospital where the injured/dead were taken, reported of his call to the Chinese embassy where Kim “expressed his heartfelt condolences and sympathy,” and then followed up two days later with Kim seeing off the corpses and survivors, showing a remorseful look beside a stern-looking Chinese ambassador Li Jinjun.⁶¹⁾ Such solicitude by the North Korean leader and its reportage by state media were unprecedented. This comes at a time of repairing of the relationship between the elite of the Workers’ Party of Korea and the CCP, as CCP Central Committee member Song Tao’s visit along with the Chinese art troupe to Pyongyang — meeting with Kim Jong Un and the leader’s wife, Ri Sol Ju, and sister, Kim Yo Jong, among other WPK members — had captured the headlines and photos of the front page of the *Rodong Sinmun* on April 14, 15 (anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birthday), 17, 18, and 19,⁶²⁾ marking a “fresh high phase” in the DPRK-PRC

Ahead of the Peak Season,” *Global Times*, March 11, 2019.

60) Private discussion with travel company operator, April 28, 2018; for details of the crash, see Oliver Hotham, “‘Heavy Casualties’ in Tour Bus Crash in N. Korea, Says Chinese Foreign Ministry,” *NK News*, April 23, 2018.

61) *Rodong Sinmun*, April 24 and 26, 2018, p. 1.

62) See *Rodong Sinmun*, April 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, pp. 1-2. In the April 20 issue, page

friendship.⁶³) This demonstrates how important it was for Kim to maintain a positive image of himself to not only the leaders in Beijing but also the Chinese people. In addition, the North Korean people were manifestly made aware of Kim's concern for China, namely its cultural visitors and tourists, reinforcing what had previously been indicated to anyone who had attended the Mass Games in 2012 or 2013. Regardless, this summit added to his legitimacy as a leader.

6) Creating Beneficiaries — The Kim Family, Institutions, and the Military

North Korea's most profitable businesses, including hotels, restaurants and department stores (that is, businesses in the service industry), are said to be controlled by the Kim family and supposedly run by Office 39, the entity created by former leader Kim Jong Il to earn hard currency to be used solely at the discretion of the North Korean leader and for his priorities, thus creating a bifurcated economy in North Korea: a "royal court economy" and the national economy, with the entities linked to the national economy forbidden to interfere in the businesses affiliated with Office 39.⁶⁴) That would suggest that tourism

2, it reports (with photo) of a commemorative stamp of Kim's meeting with Xi Jinping in China in March, showing the two shaking hands.

63) KCNA, April 14, 2018.

64) DW Documentary, "North Korea - All the Dictator's Men," written and directed by Marjolaine Grappe, DW Documentary, March 31, 2019.

and hospitality enterprises inside the country all come under the supervision of this office, and thus Kim Jong Un.

While tourism is technically under the umbrella of the government's National Tourism Administration (NTA), different state-owned bodies have set up tourism companies and manage different types of service businesses. For example, the Korea National Heritage International Travel Company (established in 2015), is said to be an entity of the National Heritage Protection Guidance Bureau, which is believed to be under the Cabinet. Air Koryo Tours (established in 2016 or 2017) is believed to be an affiliate of the state-owned national flag carrier, which is the country's only commercial airline who's "absence of boundaries" between itself and North Korea's air force lead many to believe its status as an entity of the military.⁶⁵⁾ Several new domestic travel agencies were also created in the Kim Jong Un era, suggesting tangible and attractive direct, indirect, and tacit impacts, which led other state organs to get involved in the industry, including the military.⁶⁶⁾ The first-ever Wonsan airshow, held in September 2016, is

65) Air Koryo and all airports/airfields inside DPRK territory are controlled by the Korean People's Air Force via the country's Civilian Aviation Bureau. The company's aircraft are said to be available to the military, are used for intelligence gathering operations abroad, and are maintained and repaired by military engineering staff. UN Security Council, "Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009)," United Nations S/2014/147, March 6, 2014, pp. 49-51. For background on Air Koryo, see GlobalSecurity.org, "Military: Air Koryo."

66) The 2016 Wonsan International Friendship Air Festival—a tourism product organized jointly by North Korea's Wonsan-Mt Kumgang Tourism Development

another example of how diverse agencies are involved in the tourism sector, as multiple state agencies, central and local, came together to pull off a major event that can only be considered a new product created for the tourism industry.⁶⁷⁾

7) Coopting Segments of the People — Targeting Donju and the Middle-class Youth?

As mentioned above, for authority to rule in North Korea, most relevant is leadership legitimacy, which for Kim Jong Un is conditioned by the personalist Kim-family leadership and legacy (of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il) and his regime's performance (i.e., economic development and modernization) in relation to state-society relations (especially between ruling regime and the loyal classes). Tourism development has unfolded in a way that is closely linked to Kim Jong Un's legitimacy. As mentioned, it was not until his era that North Korean scholars began to discuss more openly and comprehensively, as well as define indigenously the concepts of 'socialist tourism' and 'leisure time', thus in effect

Company and the UK-based Juche Travel Services — held at the new Kalma Airport — an exclusively military airfield converted into a 'civilian' airport — is another example of the military's direct involvement in the tourism industry. Ouellette, *North Korean Tourism* (2017), p. 90.

67) Multiple agencies include the DPRK air force (by use of the new Kalma airport, air force jet-planes, pilots, parachutists, etc.), the Wonsan-Mt. Kungang Tourism Zone Development authorities, National Tourism Administration, various tourism companies, North Korean Red Cross, among others. *Ibid.* p. 90.

announcing to the domestic masses the state's intention and progress toward "providing people with more affluent and cultured life."

Officially, the state claims that the goal of providing "all women and men with stable and decent jobs, education and/or training have already been achieved long time ago" and that youth unemployment does not exist in the DPRK.⁶⁸⁾ If North Korea took recommendations in the 1994 UNWTO 'Action Plan' for DPRK tourism development as a guideline/benchmark for the industry's development, then Pyongyang would be seeking to employ upwards of 225,000 privileged North Korean citizens, mainly youth (and many females), in the tourism and hospitality sector. Under Kim Jong Un, the development and expansion of tourism colleges in North Korea, and dispatch of more 'guest workers' to China for hotel and hospitality training suggest the building of manpower for such employment.⁶⁹⁾

If the leader prioritizes tourism, then it becomes attractive work. The development requires, first and foremost, labor for construction. For example, when the work on the Wonsan-Mt. Kumgang International Tourist Zone did not go smoothly after the announcement of the project's plans, in 2017–2018 Kim mobilized 120,000 soldier-builders and 20,000 local residents to the Kalma district.⁷⁰⁾ While the work of

68) Government of the DPRK, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda," June 2021, p. 31.

69) By 2017, the number of 'guest workers' alone would reach an estimated 50,000 workers legally working in China — although the number engaged in hotel and hospitality training/work is unknown. Wertz, "China-North Korea" (2019).

70) Lee, Kim, and Kang, *The Trends* (2020), pp. 117–118.

soldier-builders is not ‘self-chosen’ employment per se, from a North Korean’s point of view it can be seen as prestigious work, however difficult, as it involves the youth in a project of direct importance to the supreme leader. This view comes through in statements by the department head of the Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League, who praises the young people for being the “vanguard of economic construction,” including as the leaders of the major renovation projects at Samjiyon County and the construction of Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist area.⁷¹⁾ Realization of tourism’s legacy and modernization-related projects would seem to be a yardstick in which his people – or those loyal constituents of the Kim-family leadership – can intrinsically measure Kim’s leadership, with every single citizen of the ruling ‘service class’⁷²⁾ and emergent ‘entrepreneurial class’ selected and responsible to bring these projects to fruition subsequently afforded the opportunity not only to demonstrate their personal loyalty to the leader, but also reap personally the potential collective and individual, inherent and residual future benefits linked to project completion, such as status, prestige, monetary compensation, career advancement, long-term employment, access to information about the

71) “Young People in the Lead,” *Korea Today* (2018), p. 7.

72) For explanation of these classes, and the capitalist class formation in post-socialist North Korea, see Peter Ward, Andrei Lankov, and Jiyoung Kim, “Capitalism from Below with North Korean Characteristics: The State, Capitalist Class Formation, and Foreign Investment in Comparative Perspective,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2019), pp. 539–542.

outside world (through interactions with tourists), usage of leisure facilities and services, and so forth.

Of course, apprehensions of such closer contact among those chosen to work directly in the tourism industry and with Chinese visitors may still linger.⁷³⁾ But Kim Jong Un is steering a post-socialist economy altogether vulnerable, bifurcated (state-centered but featuring a peculiar type of ‘capitalism from below’⁷⁴⁾), and shackled,⁷⁵⁾ yet somehow stable.⁷⁶⁾ The society he inherited is more knowledgeable about the outside world, and the youth more materialistic and less grounded in socialist traditions. Social change has occurred, driven from the inside and from the bottom up, as “most of the social effects have come from the people themselves in their attempts to modernize,” with the political leaders then forced to make some concessions.⁷⁷⁾ The regime must cater to its loyal constituents, a ruling ‘service class’ of professionals and technocrats. Kim is also faced with coopting an urban capitalists class

73) As one former German ambassador to the DPRK noted, while it seems the Chinese visiting North Korea get better treatment, mistrust is strong, as evidenced by one sign in Pyongyang that read, “Stop dreaming the Chinese dream.” Comments by Thomas Schafer in “How the Hardliners Prevailed in North Korea,” NK News Podcast ep. 183, May 18, 2021.

74) Ward, Lankov, and Kim, “Capitalism from Below” (2019), p. 549.

75) William Brown, “Special Report: North Korea’s Shackled Economy, 2018,” NCNK, March 2018.

76) Eun-Lee Joung, “Is the North Korean Economy under Kim Jong Un in Danger? ‘Arduous March’ in the Age of COVID-19?” 38 North, July 13, 2021.

77) Discussion with international humanitarian aid NGO worker who has considerable experience working in the DPRK, June 2014.

of entrepreneurs who form the basis of the country's nascent bourgeoisie — a class that formed not from the existing nomenklatura, which remains in full political and administrative control of the state, but from non-cadre entrepreneurs during a time of grave economic hardship⁷⁸⁾ — who hold significant capital in which the regime seeks to capture.

3. Arrested Development: Tourism and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Despite North Korea's pro-foreign direct investment rhetoric and adjustments to legal code for FDI under Kim Jong Un, it seems that no substantial foreign investment has developed in North Korea's major construction projects at its new tourism development zones — that is, Wonsan-Kalma, Mubong Special Tourist Zone in Samjiyon county, and Yangdok Hot Spring Resort.⁷⁹⁾ This is not surprising, considering the

78) From 1990 to 2018, the “growth of the urban entrepreneurial class was tacitly tolerated since it was seen as politically less dangerous because this growth happened largely outside the semi-paralyzed state sector or on its margins. Nonetheless, even though the urban market economy has been tolerated and, under Kim Jong-un, even encouraged, the authorities so far have refrained from openly acknowledging or accepting the existence of private businesses in the country” — a major difference from Vietnam and China. Ward, Lankov, and Kim, “Capitalism from Below” (2019), p. 549.

79) Note that there have been reports of joint venture investments in the Mubong Tourist Zone, but it appears those stopped after 2016/2017 due to sanctions

country's low level of development, small size, underlying suspicions about foreign capital, and general mistreatment of investors, rendering FDI stock held artificially low because of political conditions.⁸⁰⁾

But under Kim Jong Un, until 2020, North Korea itself had invested a lot to develop tourism. It was one of Kim's signature sectors for development, linked to his leadership image, plans for national economic development and informatization,⁸¹⁾ and *his* relations with the loyal class and the youth. With sanctions still in force, going forward, North Korea will require all the foreign currency it can generate. Optimistically speaking, one way to do that may be through the flow of inbound Chinese tourists, as tourism receipts might remain one of the only ways for the regime to earn foreign currency legally, and China may be the only country willing to still allow package tours to the DPRK, despite tourism being perceived by some as violating the spirit of international sanctions targeting North Korea.⁸²⁾

concerns. In the city of Sinuiju there is some significant Chinese FDI specifically for tourism—a joint venture between Korea Myohyangsan Travel Company and Dandong International Travel Company built the Sinuiju-River Amnok Tourist Zone on the riverbanks. However, while adjacent to a public leisure ground, this tourist space is off-limits to the general public. The Chinese built and operated 4-star hotel in Tongrim County, however, has catered to domestic citizens.

80) Ward, Lankov, and Kim, "Capitalism from Below" (2019), pp. 546, 548.

81) For example, in 2019 the Haebangsan Hotel and Rungna People's Recreation Ground Management Station were recognized as two of the top ten model informatization units of the country. *Pyongyang Times*, November 9, 2019, p. 3.

82) Saeme Kim, "The Trouble with Resuming Mount Kumgang Tourism," *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2019.

Furthermore, if reconciliation with South Korea becomes a consideration for Pyongyang at some point, and some form of sanctions relief comes, the DPRK could also seek to reengage the South Korean market by reopening the border crossing at the DMZ and offer enclave-type resort tourism once again – to the mountains at Kungang, beaches of Wonsan-Kalma, or slopes of Masik Ski Resort. But with the international order in flux, US-China rivalry intensifying, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict galvanizing democracies to stand up to authoritarians globally, the external environment – an emerging Cold War 2.0 – may not provide the authoritarian Kim regime the leeway to do so. A new administration in Seoul also may not want or be willing to find the latitude to entertain such engagement. Besides, even when the newly built tourism accommodations in places like Wonsan-Kalma and Mt. Paektu come online for foreign visitors, Chinese tourists still offer an ‘ideologically safer’ customer and sufficient target market to fill that capacity, guaranteeing Pyongyang earnings potential equivalent if not greater than the pre-pandemic years. As long as China is willing to allow its citizens to travel to North Korea as tourists, then the Chinese tourist market shall suffice.

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis in early 2020 and the 8th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in January 2021, the major tourism-related development projects no longer seem to be a priority. The grand opening of the Wonsan-Kalma Tourist Area had been scheduled for April 2020, but has yet to happen. The tourist hotel resort and ski slopes at Samjiyon – hailed as an “ideal socialist village” and

“the epitome of modern civilization” by the supreme leader — had not been completed when the township was officially opened by Kim in December 2019⁸³⁾ — although this setback has not deterred Asian-based business services firms from forecasting the ski resort’s “soft launch” to select domestic citizens in 2023 and international opening to foreign visitors in 2024.⁸⁴⁾ Little progress has been made to date on the redevelopment plans of Sinuiju, despite the flood of Chinese-day trippers to the city up until the DPRK border closure in January 2020.⁸⁵⁾ For authoritarian systems, performance flaws are usually hidden, but can become glaringly apparent when, among other things, an environmental or public-health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic occurs.⁸⁶⁾

Yet tourism and hospitality accomplishments have not totally left the scene, as evidenced by the opening of a large new hotel in southwest city of Sariwon in October 2021,⁸⁷⁾ continuing the narrative of tourism

83) BBC, “North Korea Unveils Town Hailed as ‘Epitome of Civilization’,” December 3, 2019.

84) Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “Samjiyon: North Korea’s Newest Ski Resort,” Silk Road Briefing (Dezan Shira & Associates), November 18, 2021.

85) Martyn Williams, “Sinuiju City: Big Plans, Little Progress,” 38 North, March 8, 2021.

86) Nathan, “The Puzzle” (2020), p. 165.

87) The opening of the Jongbongsan Hotel, which began construction in the year Kim Jong Il died, experienced inexplicable delays, was publicized in the Rodong Sinmun in October 2021. The hotel will cater presumably to local tourists. Chad O’Carroll, “New North Korean Hotel Opens after 10-year Construction Period,” NK News, October 21, 2021. The hotel appears to be serviced by the new domestic

and leisure development for the North Korean people even in times of pandemic. Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea has made tourism part of its long-term development strategy, and the government already has a well-developed plan for its socialist tourism,⁸⁸⁾ giving tourism the potential to be a “low-hanging fruit” even in the post-pandemic future.⁸⁹⁾ The fact that tourism and recreation are specifically mentioned in connection to several National Development Goals in the DPRK’s 2021 Voluntary National Review on implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), submitted to the United Nations in June 2021 (see Appendix), is another positive sign for tourism’s future, signaling possible willingness on the part of North Korea to engage the international community on mutually and suitably related projects.

Up to the time of this writing, North Korea maintains a “zero COVID-19 policy” mandating strict border lockdowns and quarantine measures, despite still claiming no confirmed COVID-19 cases or deaths — a dubious statement⁹⁰⁾ — and has not yet begun a vaccination

agency, the Jongbansan Travel Company.

88) A glimpse of this can be gleaned from North Korea’s publication, *Compendium of Economics Research 17: Tourism Management Methodology* (2015).

89) Ramon Pacheco Pardo, “Tourism: Low-Hanging Fruit for Economic Growth,” in Craig Tiedman, ed., *Restructuring North Korea: Challenges and Opportunities* (London: The Henry Jackson Society, 2020), pp. 19–23.

90) For anecdotal reports that dispute that claim, see Mun Dong Hui, “Explaining Reports of COVID-19 Infections Deep Inside N. Korea,” Daily NK, March 2, 2020; Adam Cathcart, “North Korea and Coronavirus: International Relations and Local Data from Dandong,” SinoNK, September 21, 2021.

initiative. Nevertheless, when the pandemic subsides, globetrotters will travel; but doubtfully to coronavirus-ridden countries suffering from poor sanitation and inadequate medical/healthcare facilities. For North Korea, maintaining the fiction of being COVID-free remains important for propaganda. Prior to the pandemic, Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang where he pledged his support of Kim's drive to develop the economy and improve the lives of the people,⁹¹⁾ and Chinese curiosity about North Korea as a tourism destination continued to grow. When borders reopen, China's experience implementing 'travel bubbles' during the 2022 Winter Olympics may be something North Korea can consider for inbound visitors from China in places like Sinuiju. Resort-style 'tourism enclaves' could be run at places like Wonsan-Kalma, Mt. Paektu, and perhaps even the remote Mt. Chilbo if transportation routes are widely improved. For the Kim regime, the goal will ultimately be to maintain Chinese tourists' positive image of and satisfaction with North Korean tourist destinations,⁹²⁾ while increasing interest among them for new

91) Xi Jinping, "Let Us Continuously Create a New Chapter of the Era by Continuing the China-DPRK Friendship," *Rodong Sinmun*, June 19, 2019, p. 1 (in Korean).

92) According to a recent study, Chinese tourists had shown a steady increase in satisfaction levels with tours to Pyongyang. Kim Han Kyu, "Chinese Tourists' Satisfaction" (2020). If accurate, this represents a change from earlier studies, which claim satisfaction levels among Chinese tourists were not that high, and that improvements would have to be made continually to maintain customer satisfaction and favorable image of the destination. Fangxuan Li and Chris Ryan, "Chinese Tourists' Motivations and Satisfaction of Visiting North Korea," *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 20, No. 12 (2015), pp. 1313-1331; Jie Yang, Liyan Han, and Guangyu Ren, "China-to-North Korea Tourism: A Leisure

destinations. So a major focus will be on selling an image of DPRK places as modern, clean, upscale, “Covid-free” sites of leisure—especially in its promotion of, among others, the beach-resort complex in Wonsan,⁹³⁾ the ski and winter sports facilities at Masikryong and Mt. Paektu (the latter of which is one of 20 new candidates for evaluation as a UNESCO Global Geopark, of which North Korea officially applied for listing in 2018),⁹⁴⁾ the recently reconstructed and operating (as of January 2020) well-being spa at Yangdok Hot Springs Tourist Area,⁹⁵⁾ and the renovated and reopened (as of June 2020) Pyongyang Golf Course located in Nampho City.⁹⁶⁾

Finally, unlike North Korean businesses abroad that are believed to

Business on a Tense Peninsula,” *North Korean Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2014), pp. 57–70.

93) For example, some international travel professionals believe that Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist resort must focus on South Korean tourists, as the numbers of Chinese tourists to Wonsan/Mt. Kumgang are too small, transportation is lacking, and the Chinese market has not demonstrated suitable desire. NK News, “Pyongyang or Bust: DPRK Tourism and the Pandemic,” NK News Podcast Ep. 196, August 17, 2021. Nevertheless, part of the stated reason the area was selected for tourism development was its less-than-two-hours proximity via air flight to major Chinese, Russian, and Japanese cities. See 38 North, “The Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Area,” January 14, 2021.

94) UNESCO, “2020 New UNESCO Global Geopark Applications,” 2020; Yonhap News, “North Korean Media, ‘Mt. Paektu, UNESCO Global Geopark Registration Actively Promoted,’” May 31, 2020 (in Korean).

95) Yonhap News, “N. Korea’s Yangdok spa resort begins operations,” January 10, 2020.

96) For new online video promotion by DPRK media outlet Naenara, see “Pyongyanggolpjang” [Pyongyang Golf Course], June 2020.

work solely for earning foreign currency for Office 39,⁹⁷⁾ the tourism industry inside the country would appear to feed back into the domestic economy, a ‘consumer class’, in some way, with the industry’s development and expansion creating spinoffs: more students studying at the tourism colleges; more middle-class people involved in the related hospitality and services businesses; more local building materials companies and workers involved in hotel construction and renovations, facilities maintenance, and so forth.⁹⁸⁾ If Kim Jong Un’s modernization of the country continues, so will tourism and leisure development, and these will play a role in improving the lives of the people.

4. Conclusion

Despite regime apprehensions, tourism opening and development for North Korea provided great attractiveness to Kim Jong Un. It yielded ample foreign exchange earnings through tourism receipts thanks mainly to the Chinese tourist flows amid diminishing trade. Tourism factored into a type of sports diplomacy with the US, as well as in the

97) DW Documentary, “North Korea – All the Dictator’s Men,” 2019.

98) Ouellette, “Understanding the ‘Socialist Tourism’” (2020), pp. 73-74; Lee, Kim and Kang, *The Trends* (2020). For comments on the idea of a ‘consumer class’ seeking leisure opportunities and ‘middle class’ staffing the tourism-related service industries, see Simon Cockerall, “City Tourism in North Korea: Spaces for Exchanges and New Opportunities,” presentation at the international conference on *Urban North Korea: Changes and Exchanges*, Seoul, Korea, June 19, 2019.

restoration of relations with China in a time of increasing great power rivalry and geopolitical uncertainty. Tourism also functioned as a very public leadership undertaking that augments the Kim Jong Un regime's legitimacy through particularistic narratives and perceived performance in economic development, ostensibly moving the country toward a leisure society and thus enhancing internal solidarity among the loyal classes through economic, employment, and leisure opportunities, without threatening significantly the country's sociopolitical system.

Appendix

Summary of Tourism's Relations to DPRK National Development Goals, June 2021

Goal #	Directly linked goals (significant contents summarized)
#1	<p>- Improving people's livelihood - stating as progress "the bases for cultural and leisure activities for people are newly built and people-oriented policies being consolidated including paid leave, recuperation and relaxation at state expense," with the government setting as a target to increase such bases, citing that the completion of several tourism and leisure-related constructions between 2013-2020, including Masikryong Skiing Resort, Mirim Horse Riding Club, Munsu Wading Pool, Rungra People's Sports Park and Yangdok Hot Spring Resort, along with construction of indoor stadiums and outdoor sports facilities countrywide and the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist resort being in progress, with priority plans given to push ahead with "regional specific constructions in each county . . . in a planned way to provide people with maximum social benefits and cultured living conditions"</p>
#11	<p>- Ensure living conditions and environment for more affluent and civilized life - being linked to the protection and use of national heritage (cultural, natural, and scenic sites), which contributes to the people's life and health</p>
#12	<p>- Ensure sustainable consumption and production - stating as progress and challenges that the "government encourages the development of tourism," actively conducting "domestic tourism on scenic spots such as Mt. Kumgang, Mt. Myohyang, and Mt. Chilbo" and pushing forward the work to "complete the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist area," while stating plans to establish a sustainable tourism strategy and to convert Kangwon Province into a tourism area with tourism goods being actively developed</p>
#14	<p>- Conserve and sustainably use the coast, sea and marine resources - stating as progress and challenges that "Wonsan City as its extended area [is] to proceed the regional development and protection of coastal biodiversity with the main stress on the tourism in a planned way"</p>

	Indirectly linked goals
#2	- Development of sustainable agriculture and food self-sufficiency, as these are linked to state assistance to rural economy whose production provides the regional accommodation and hospitality services directly linked to tourism industry
#15	- Sustainable management of forests, reversing land degradation, and maintenance of biodiversity through the tourism-related scenic and natural sites linked to these goals

Note: Author's summary.

Source: DPRK's 2021 Voluntary National Review on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda on SDGs, June 2021, pp. 14-15, 36, 38-39, and 42.

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생존주의 북한의 선택적 관광 개발: 김정은 리더십의 정통성

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2012년부터 2020년 1월 코로나 팬데믹으로 국경이 닫힐 때까지 김정은 시대의 관광 개발은 그 이전 시대와는 차원이 다른 수준에서 진행되었다. 사회주의 체제의 맥락에서 관광 개발이 사상적, 정치적 '위협'으로 인식되어 왔음에도 불구하고 김정은 체제는 관광 개발에 적극적이었다. 북한이 원자화되고, 고립주의적인 자립경제를 표방하고, 극도의 안보 중심 체제와 강력한 국제 제재를 받고 있는 탈전체주의 국가임을 감안해 봤을 때, 관광 개발이 체제 전복보다는 유지 기능을 수행하고 있다는 점이 흥미롭다. 이에 본 연구는 김정은 체제의 관광 개발이 북한이 직면한 어려운 상황에 대한 단순한 대응 기제를 넘어서 체제 유지를 위한 다면적 기능을 수행한다는 가설을 설정했다. 대외적으로 북한의 관광은 미국의 간접적인 관여와 이웃 강대국인 중국과의 선택적 협력의 도구로 기능한다. 관광은 국제 제재 환경 아래 외화 수입원의 역할뿐만 아니라 경제적 및 지정학적 불확실성이 증가하는 시기에 주요 후견국인 중국과의 관계를 복원하는 역할을 수행한다. 내부적으로 관광은 북한식의 근대적이고 문화적인 사회주의문

명국 건설을 위한 유산 정치 및 장기 집권의 열망과 연계됨으로써 세습 후계자 통치의 정당성을 강화하는 기제로 작동한다.

주제어: 권위주의 체제, 북한, 김정은, 관광개발, 리더십 정통성