

## Contemplating Tourism Politics and North Korea's Post-Pandemic World\*

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Up until early 2020, North Korea under Kim Jong Un had opened more widely to tourism as his regime pursued tourism development for multifarious purposes. However, social changes, changing external environment, and the authorities' responses to them are reshaping the country including tourism. Nevertheless, while in limbo during the pandemic years, tourism development was not abandoned. How has Pyongyang's outlook for tourism changed during the pandemic, and what path will North Korea take to revive this seemingly peripheral yet portentously significant leader-linked industry? This paper qualitatively examines the current state of North Korea and its 'socialist tourism' by considering various internal dynamics and external factors that influence the leadership. With the pandemic having served as proxy for shutting out the world and shifting toward insularity nationwide, affording the regime time to reinforce ideological purity and political loyalty among the population, the contact and mobility aspects of the tourism reopening will be cautious, selective and limited, emphasizing political heritage and links with 'friendly' countries. Nevertheless, the industry's sustainability will require regime compromises to the society it wants to control and international actors it seeks to exploit.

Keywords: North Korea, socialist tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, tourism politics

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# 1. Introduction

Up until early 2020, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) under Kim Jong Un had opened more widely to travel and leisure as his regime pursued tourism development amid the leader-led drive for modernization, economic policy innovation, foreign currency procurement, image branding, and international outreach, among other purposes. However, diplomatic failures (e.g., the February 2019 DPRK-US summit in Hanoi), rising global tensions and shifting international order (stemming from US-China rivalry, Russian invasion of Ukraine, movement from a unilateral to multipolar world), and especially natural disaster (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) seemingly derailed Kim's tourism development plans, as international arrivals came to a full stop upon North Korea's strict border closure beginning in late January 2020 — the regime's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, while in limbo the tourism development has been not abandoned. How has Pyongyang's outlook for tourism changed? What path will North Korea take to revive this seemingly peripheral yet portentously significant leader-linked industry? In this study I qualitatively examine the current state of North Korea's 'socialist tourism' development by considering internal and external changes that influence the leadership and its policy decisions, including for tourism. To this end, North Korean documents, statements, and media, as well as the international scholarly literature and press, are examined to inform the narrative and enlighten the analysis.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides some background on North Korea's tourism and discussion of tourism politics — the framework for this paper's analysis. I then discuss the external and internal dimensions in the country prior to and during the years of the pandemic/border closure, thus revealing the Kim regime's shifting priorities. The final section illuminates aspects that are likely to emerge with North Korea's tourism reopening in the post-pandemic era. The conclusion summarizes some of the advantages and disadvantages of the policy alternatives from the viewpoint of the North Korean authorities in order to provide a broader understanding of North Korea and the possible future of its tourism industry.

## 2. Tourism in North Korea and Tourism Politics

Under the guidance of founding leader Kim Il Sung (1948–1994) and successor Kim Jong Il (1994–2011), tourism functioned largely as international propaganda, and was not a priority industry for socioeconomic development nor integration with the national economy, as both leaders harbored fears about tourism's suitability with the North Korean socialist system<sup>1)</sup> — although the signal of a broader

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1) For background on North Korean tourism industry under the former leaders, see North Korean Research Institute, *Bukchan chongram 1983–1993* (Seoul: Dong-A Publishing Co., 1994, in Korean); North Korean Research Institute, *Bukchan chongram 1993–2003* (Seoul: Dong-A Publishing Co., 2003, in Korean); Derek R.

international ‘mass tourism’ opening toward South Korea and China (the latter being the most significant market for the DPRK in terms of tourism receipts) did materialize during the Kim Jong Il era.<sup>2)</sup> However, in March 2013, Kim Jong Un (2012–present) first endorsed tourism expansion in a speech at the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) plenum, after which the North Korean media stated the authorities’ intention to develop tourism as one of the country’s “major industries,”<sup>3)</sup> and briskly promoted a tourism industry — albeit one that continues to follow a ‘Stalinist’ tourism development model,<sup>4)</sup> or what the North Koreans now define as “our-style Socialist tourism,”<sup>5)</sup> whose characteristics remain to a large extent a type of ‘Potemkin tourism’ program<sup>6)</sup> —

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Hall, “Stalinism and Tourism: A Study of Albania and North Korea,” *Annals of Tourism Studies*, Vol. 17 (1990), pp. 36–54. For comparison of tourism under the three leaders from a discourse perspective, see Dean J. Ouellette, “Understanding the ‘Socialist Tourism’ of North Korea Under Kim Jong Un,” *North Korean Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2020).

2) Jiyeon Kim, Pilsoo Choi, Minkyung Lim, and Seung Kwan Na, “Cooperation between North Korea and China in Tourism and Policy Implications,” KIEP Policy References 13-11 (Seoul: Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, December 2013, in Korean).

3) KCNA, “DPRK to Develop Tourism as One of Major Industries,” August 28, 2013.

4) See Derek Hall, “Stalinism and Tourism” (1990).

5) Articulated in the Kim Jong Un era, North Korea defines ‘socialist tourism’ as five-fold functional: a vehicle for propaganda, complement to national economic development, means to improve people’s ‘cultural’ and ‘material’ living, guardian of the natural environment, and auxiliary to the national budget revenue. Choe Jae Duk, *Compendium of Economics Research 17: Tourism Management Methodology* (Pyongyang: Korea Social Science Publishing House, 2015, in Korean).

6) That is, “the ordered arrangement of routes and visual tableau to display particular

which until the COVID-19 pandemic seemed for Kim to serve multifarious purposes, including economic construction and special economic zone development, modernization, and policy innovation,<sup>7)</sup> as well as the broader objective of enhancing the leader's legitimacy.<sup>8)</sup> Kim himself has emphasized the need for an awareness of 'international trends' for pursuing economic development, including for the development of tourism<sup>9)</sup> and related sectors like cultural heritage.<sup>10)</sup> And while the DPRK political system has acted as a barrier to

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achievements or forfend particular public relations problems." Gregory Fayard, "Theorising the Politics of Tourism: Global Travel and the Nation-State," *Millennium*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2023), pp. 489-518.

- 7) Theo Clement, "Between Economic Reform and Support of an 'Independent National Economy'," *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 Yoo, Young-Duk Kim, Dong-Han Shin, and Yong-Hyun Kim, "A Study on the Characteristics and Limitations of Special Tourism Zones in North Korea in the Kim Jong Un Era," *Tourism Research*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2021), pp. 241-261 (in Korean); Robert Carlin and Rachel Minyoung Lee, "Understanding Kim Jong Un's Economic Policymaking," 38 North Special Report, Stimson Center, February, 2024.
- 8) Ouellette, "Survivalist North Korea's Selective Tourism" (2022).
- 9) See Kim Song Chol, "International Trends in Tourism Attractions and Their Selection," *Kyŏngje yŏngu* [Economic Research], Vol. 174, No. 1 (2017).
- 10) 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, p. 10.

development, marginalizing North Korea in the global tourist marketplace, at the same time this barrier became a tourist attraction,<sup>11)</sup> which the Kim Jong Un regime chose to exploit.

However, changes in society and the external environment have seemingly led to a shifting of priorities and subsequently the tourism expansion. As is well known, tourism is influenced by the surrounding socioeconomic conditions, which are highly politicized, whereby governments use tourism for political purposes.<sup>12)</sup> North Korea's tourism features its own politics — which scholars have discussed varyingly.<sup>13)</sup> Likewise, many post-Soviet nations transitioning from

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11) The 'barrier as attraction' is in a way similar to the Cuban case. For discussion, see Renata Rettinger and Mirosław Wójtowicz, "Regional Differences in the Development of Tourism in Cuba," in M. Wójtowicz and A. Winiarczyk-Rażniak, eds., *Environmental and Socio-economic Transformations in Developing Areas as the Effect of Globalization* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, 2014), pp. 136–154. Nevertheless, even among Chinese tourists, one motive to visit the DPRK was to revisit what China's communist past looked like. North Korea seems to acknowledge 'uniqueness' as tourist attraction. See the discussion on international trends and the selection of tourism attractions by North Korean academic Kim Song Chul, "International Trends" (2017).

12) Linda K. Richter, "Tourism Politics and Political Science: A Case of Not so Benign Neglect," *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1983), pp. 313–335; Linda K. Richter, *The Politics of Tourism in Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989); Gregory Fayard, "Theorising the Politics" (2023).

13) Samuel S. Kim, Dallen J. Timothy, and Hag-Chin Ha, "Tourism and Political Ideologies: A Case of Tourism in North Korea," *Tourism Management*, Vol. 28 (2007); Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); John Connell, "Tourism as Political Theatre in North Korea," *Political Geography*, Vol. 68 (2019),

communism to capitalism struggle “to reach the economic growth goals that capitalism promised,” and tourism’s “capitalist nature . . . promotes Western values of independence, consumerism, and cultural exploitation” that tend to be “in sharp contrast to the communist ideals of solidarity and the collective proletariat,” with nationalism and national identity allowed to influence economic policy and thus influence tourism development to different degrees.<sup>14)</sup> While North Korea does not fit the models of such transition economies, it similarly does confront the challenges that tourism’s ‘Western values’ present: as the last ‘Stalinist’ state, the DPRK clings to the ideals of solidarity and collectivism, has yet to effectively embrace a transition away from socialist planned economy and toward market-oriented principles, and promotes tourism under a totalitarian economic development strategy still focused on constructing a centralized, self-reliant, and independent national economy based on planned economic system, collective and state ownership, government controlled resource allocation, and supplemented by foreign economic cooperation<sup>15)</sup> — the last of which has been limited, since in the post-Cold War for the most part the DPRK still lingers as an actor on the periphery of the international

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pp. 34–45; Dean J. Ouellette, “Survivalist North Korea’s Selective Tourism Development,” *Review of North Korean Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2022), pp. 240–297; Alberto Ballestros, “The Pandemic and North Korea’s Tourism Industry: Another Shock for the Regime,” *38 North*, April 8, 2021.

14) Susan L. Slocum and Valeria Klitsounova, eds., *Tourism Development in Post-Soviet Nations: From Communism to Capitalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 2.

15) Samuel Kim et al., “Tourism and Political Ideologies” (2007).

economy, operating various licit and illicit trade networks under “institutional frameworks ... designed to both encourage and discourage economic activities,”<sup>16)</sup> as North Korea being a smaller socialist economy remains resistant to “a development strategy that calls for engagement with the international economy” since such would make “it difficult to limit [the country’s] exposure to external forces.”<sup>17)</sup>

At a social level, embracing tourism requires embracing certain levels of contact and mobility – the spatial interactions of the actors involved – which can impact the indigenous communities of the host and the guests themselves, <sup>18)</sup> with the former being particularly problematic for the Kim-family leadership who are responsible for constructing a social system fixated on hierarchical classification,

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16) Justin V. Hastings, *A Most Enterprising Country: North Korea in the Global Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. xiv-xv.

17) Jorge F. Perez-Lopez, *Cuba at a Crossroads* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 211.

18) For some discussion on the mobility aspect, see C. Michael Hall, “Tourism and Mobility,” paper presented at CAUTHE 2004: Creating Tourism Knowledge, Brisbane, Australia, 2004. For discussion of how contact can impact host and guest, see Donald V. L. Macleod, “Power, Resources and Identity: The Influence of Tourism on Indigenous Communities,” in P. M. Burns and M. Novelli, eds, *Tourism and Social Identities* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2006, pp. 111–123); Fangxuan (Sam) Li and Binyu Wang, “Social Contact Theory and Attitude Change Through Tourism: Researching Chinese Visitors to North Korea,” *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 36 (2020), p. 100743. In this paper I refer to contact and mobility in the broadest sense of interaction between people and space, host and guest, internal and external, individual and group, private and governmental, local and national, as well as exchange of capital, information, ideas, etc.



atomization, and isolation of the indigenous masses. The North Korean leadership has long railed against the corruptive influences of ‘alien’ and ‘decadent’ capitalist cultures, which are seen as threats to the maintenance of the system and inevitable survival of the regime. North Korea’s socialist principles and ideology (Juche), as well as not having normalized relations with the post-War ‘rule maker’ of the international system (the United States) or key capitalist economic neighbors (Japan and South Korea, who remain North Korea’s historical enemies), have made it difficult for the Kim-family regime to find suitable compromise between its socialist system and its enemies in order to positively connect with the international system. In sum, in a country like North Korea, changes — be they social, economic, or political — in the external and internal environments may impact the tourism development significantly.

### 3. Developments during the Pandemic

#### 1) External Dimensions: International Politics and Changing Global Order, and the Pandemic

As noted, recent diplomatic failures, global tensions, and natural disaster have seemingly led to the derailment of the leader’s tourism development plans. First, at the historic second-ever US-DPRK summit (in Hanoi) in February 2019, North Korea failed to gain a favorable

political outcome — that is, improvement in the US-DPRK relationship — that would have brought about relief from international sanctions against the DPRK and, ultimately, movement toward normalization of US-DPRK relations in order to end what North Korea sees as ‘hostile’ US policy. Such would have bolstered a more positive image of North Korea among the international community and allowed for pursuit of further growth in tourism markets internationally. This did not happen, leaving North Korea faced with the prospect of relying almost solely on the Chinese market, as reopening to South Korea through resumption of the inter-Korean tourism at Mt. Kumgang remained a bridge too far politically for Seoul and Pyongyang.<sup>19)</sup>

A second variable is the rising global tensions stemming from the intensifying US-China rivalry and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, among other factors. In one respect, this has heightened the geopolitical risks felt by advanced industrial democracies, precipitating a reexamination of their ties with autocracies, including North Korea. The DPRK itself is a representative authoritarian system that for the past twenty-five years

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19) For discussion, see Jumin Lee, “Why South Korean Tourists Might Not Want to Follow Moon Up Mount Kumgang,” *NKNews*, January 22, 2020. The resort at Mt. Kumgang was receiving roughly 400,000 tourist visitors annually via the heavily (South Korean) subsidized inter-Korean cross-border tourism project before the program was stopped in July 2008 due to the shooting death of a South Korean tourist by a North Korean soldier. For discussion on the issues related to resumption of the inter-Korean tourism project, see Yong-seok Shin and Gyeong-eun Choi, *The Pending Issues Relating to the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Resumption and the Measures* (Seoul: Korea Culture & Tourism Institute, 2018).

has failed to embrace desired change (i.e., opening and reform, and denuclearization), join the international community/capitalist order, or improve the living conditions of its population (i.e., escape from chronic food insecurity)<sup>20</sup>) despite decades of international largess, meaning that improving its image among neighboring countries (i.e., South Korea and Japan) and other long-haul markets (the US, Europe, Southeast Asia, etc.) as a destination for international tourism or tourism investment cannot be easily cultivated.

Pyongyang's rivalry with Seoul since the Cold War — each on either side of the geopolitical divide — has also left North Korea unwilling to make compromises that would allow for South Korean tourists to once again travel to the DPRK (as they did during the days of South Korea's engagement policy under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations). In his administrative speech at the 5th meeting of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in late September 2021, Kim Jong Un mentioned that the international situation was “increasing in complexity and multidimensionality” as it transitions toward a “new cold war structure,” revealing possible realignment in East Asia on account of the tensions between the United States and China. During the first Cold War in the latter half of the 20th century, people from the two different ideological blocs did not travel readily or easily for tourism. Kim's comments at the meeting seem to presage a return to

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20) Food insecurity has remained chronic for the last three decades, with a level of hunger classified as “serious,” earning the country a ranking of 97th out of 121 countries on the 2022 Global Hunger Index (GHI 2022).

these bygone times.

The third dynamic and most damaging turn of the screw hitting North Korea and its tourism industry was the COVID-19 outbreak and ensuing pandemic. Non-traditional security issues like health-related epidemics and pandemics are cause for concern for any tourism industry. North Korea is no different.<sup>21)</sup> In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak elicited North Korea's most stringent reaction. At the onset of the pandemic, North Korean authorities announced swift and far reaching travel restrictions, including a complete border closure beginning January 21, 2020, then measures of strict quarantine of foreigners (15 to 30 days). Only after more than two years did the North Korean government report its first case and possible outbreak in May 12, 2022. Pyongyang announced 73 deaths in June 21, 2022 out of a

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21) However, consistency is not a word to describe Pyongyang's responses to epidemics/pandemics. For example, under the Kim Jong Il regime, when SARS hit from February to November 2003, North Korea implemented quarantine and travel restrictions on visitors for about four months (April to July), and permitted the World Health Organization (WHO) to conduct in-country workshops on SARS preparedness. Under the Kim Jong Un regime, when the Ebola virus was wreaking havoc thousands of miles away in West Africa in 2014, North Korea's response seemed a haphazard overreaction, as it instituted a 5-month border closure from mid-October 2014 to March 2015. When MERS hit South Korea in 2015, causing even China to suspend its citizens from visiting the peninsula in June, North Korea did little other than announce that it had developed a drug that can prevent MERS, Ebola, SARS, and Aids. Then, less than a year later, when the Zika virus appeared in South Korea in February 2016, North Korea ran a public awareness campaign and screened foreigners entering at airports, ports, railway stations, and border crossings, yet nevertheless allowed tourist arrivals to flow.

population of 26 million — a remarkably low number of deaths — and is said to have implemented a nationwide lockdown. Surprisingly, on August 11, 2022, North Korea announced its “victory” over COVID-19. Soon after, Pyongyang blamed Seoul for spreading the disease, and hinted at starting its own vaccination campaign in September 2022. Oddly and remarkably, for the first three years there were no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the DPRK in the government’s reporting to the UN World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>22)</sup> Despite not reporting a single case of COVID-19, and periodic rumors of a tourism reopening, North Korea’s international tourism industry remained shut until February 2024 when it finally reopened, but to a select group of 98 Russian nationals only.<sup>23)</sup> Most significantly, Pyongyang’s and Beijing’s responses to the outbreak were self-isolation and zero-COVID policy. This halted their bilateral interactions including cross-border assistance, trade, and tourist flows. From the perspective of profitmaking, this was a serious blow to North Korea, as the Chinese market is responsible for most of the foreign currency North Korea earns through tourism.

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22) World Health Organization, “WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard – Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” at <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/kp>, searched and retrieved January 17, 2023.

23) *Vedomosti* (The Record), “Primorye authorities: North Korea has begun construction of a tourist zone for Russians,” February 12, 2024 (in Russian).

## 2) Internal Dimensions: The Perils of Contact and Mobility

The coronavirus pandemic paralyzed global tourism. In response to the virus, and true to its ‘security-first, economy-second’ mindset in the production of territory,<sup>24)</sup> North Korea unilaterally closed its borders with China and Russia and increased its border security, cracking down on cross-border smuggling, grassroots markets, and activities of the donju (i.e., ‘masters of money’, a type of nouveau-riche class), thereby virtually severing authorized and illicit trade and assistance flows as well as all cross-border movement of people. This draconian measure was likely taken for two reasons: on the one hand, to prevent a virological apocalypse among the homogeneous, isolated, and chronically undernourished population unable to rely on a fragile healthcare system lacking in basic medicines, with authorities suspicious of the internal security threat pandemic-induced social unrest might pose to the regime<sup>25)</sup>; on the other hand, a strategic measure put into force to repress, co-opt, and coerce the population in order for the regime to exert strong political control over the masses,<sup>26)</sup> which had been showing increasing signs of heterogeneity – especially

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24) Seung-Ook Lee, “The Production of Territory in North Korea: ‘Security First, Economy Next,’” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2014), pp. 206–226.

25) Joshua H. Pollack and Ferenc Dalnoki-Veress, “Public-health engagement with North Korea in the COVID-19 era: challenges and opportunities,” CNS Occasional Paper No. 53, December 2021.

26) Peter Ward and Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, “Strategies of Political Control under Kim Jong Un,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2023), pp. 557–583.

among its youth — on issues of individualism, capitalism, South Korean culture, and reunification,<sup>27)</sup> and a growing uneven distribution of economic, political, and social resources and consumption between the urban and rural regions and among the social classes.<sup>28)</sup> During the pandemic years, the regime would grasp the opportunity to cut off channels and types of foreign ideological and cultural influences circulating in society and to re-instill ideological purity among the masses through enactment of new language and cultural protection laws, and rooting out and punishing ‘anti-socialist behavior’ vigorously — of which incidents in 2022 related to the tourism sites and hospitality training centers (at the Yangdok Hot Spring Resort and Wonsan) serve as examples.<sup>29)</sup> Kim Jong Un also announced plans to ameliorate the “material and cultural living standards of the people” specifically in the rural regions through the new City and Country Development Act announced in 2021 and the new regional development 20x10 policy

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27) For discussion, see Taek Bin Kim, “A Study of Heterogeneity within the Younger Generation in North Korea: Focusing on Perceptions of Individualism, Capitalism, South Korea, and Recognition of South Korea-centered Reunification,” *Review of North Korean Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2023), pp. 171–210 (in Korean).

28) Young-Ja Park et al., *Eight Changes in North Korean Economy and Society under the Kim Jong Un Regime* (Seoul: KINU, December 2018), pp. 65–78.

29) Jong So Yong: “Dozens of N. Koreans Arrested for Involvement in ‘Impure Recording’ Distribution Ring,” Daily NK, September 22, 2022, [www.dailynk.com/english/dozens-north-koreans-arrested-involvement-impure-recording-distribution-ring/](http://www.dailynk.com/english/dozens-north-koreans-arrested-involvement-impure-recording-distribution-ring/); and “North Korea Launches Investigation into Anti-Socialist Behavior in Wonsan,” Daily NK, March 30, 2022, [www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-launches-investigation-into-anti-socialist-behavior-in-wonsan/](http://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-launches-investigation-into-anti-socialist-behavior-in-wonsan/).

announced in December 2023.

Pyongyang also revved up its rhetoric of old, calling for increased austerity, self-reliance, and ingenuity among the people as coping measures. Suffering materials shortages and under mobility restrictions, the scarce resources (e.g., construction materials) and limited manpower (e.g., architects, engineers, laborers) would be redeployed away from major tourism sector infrastructure projects and toward new priorities, as evidenced by the lack of progress on Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourism zone.<sup>30)</sup> Even before the onset of the pandemic, construction of these large-scale projects had slowed at places such as Samjiyon and Sinuiju, and the facilities at Wonsan-Kalma missed on several occasions their planned opening, remaining in various stages of incompleteness.

With the pandemic and border closure, North Korea changed course. This was made clear after the WPK 8th Party Congress in January 2021, the announced outcomes of which revealed that tourism was no longer an economic priority. But tourism was not dismissed. Post-8th Party Congress and well into the restrictive pandemic years, tourism still featured in the outcomes of the congress plans (i.e., the need to repair tourist sites, diversify tourist transport routes, and alter construction efforts at Mt. Kumkang toward a North-Korean style development plan<sup>31)</sup>), was still discussed by North Korean academics (although to a much lesser degree), and domestic tourism continued to be promoted by the regime (for

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30) Peter Makowsky, Jenny Town, Iliana Ragnone, and Ryan Kleissler, "North Korea's Tourism Industry: A Grand Initiative in Limbo," *38 North*, January 26, 2023.

31) IFES, *The Economic Policies of the Kim Jong Un Era* (Seoul: IFES, 2021), pp. 96-97.



domestic solidarity building and promotion of economic growth<sup>32)</sup>).

North Korean authorities did not abandon tourism development because prior to the pandemic, signs of a nascent domestic tourism industry had emerged, as evidenced by a growing middle-class, and appearance of travel agencies catering to locals and domestic advertising of newly built tourism sites (e.g., Masikryong ski resort and Yangdok hot springs). During the pandemic, the regime shifted to a domestic focus for tourism,<sup>33)</sup> promoting heritage for ideological purposes, and smaller project completion in both the capital and regions.<sup>34)</sup> For example, in October 2020 Kim Jong Un ordered for the remodeling of several hotels in Pyongyang, calling upon a military engineering unit to complete the task by the end of the next year.<sup>35)</sup>

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32) Ibid, pp. 98 & 106.

33) North Korean media draws attention to this just after the announcement of its new law to revitalize domestic tourism. *Minju Choson*, “Domestic tourism industry developing day by day,” November 28, 2023 (in Korean).

34) The latter falls in line with the country’s adoption of a new City and Country Development Act, an outcome of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the 14<sup>th</sup> SPA in January 2021. This regional focus was more recently reinforced by Kim Jong Un’s new regional development 20x10 policy, which was announced at the 9<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting of the WPK Central Committee in December 2023, adopted at the SPA session in January 2024, and elaborated on at the enlarged meeting of the WPK CC Political Bureau that same month. Like tourism, this new policy is also directed at raising the “material and cultural living standards of the people,” but specifically in the regions.

35) Jeong Tae Joo, “Kim Jong Un orders remodeling of major hotels in Pyongyang,” Daily NK, October 13, 2020. Specifically, the Koryo, Pothonggang, Yanggakdo, Sosan, and Pyongyang Hotels.

Also, local authorities took this time to enhance accommodations capacity beyond Pyongyang in provincial cities like Kanggye and Sariwon: in the former city, authorities undertook refurbishment of lodging houses for study tourists; in the latter, renovations of the Kyongamsan Hotel and inauguration of the long awaited (by some ten years) Jongbangsan Hotel were completed.<sup>36)</sup> In the vicinities within the Wonsan coastal tourism zone, it was announced that new-type tourist battery cars and tram services for use in the area had been produced, along with tree planting to beautify the natural environment.<sup>37)</sup> And in resorts such as at Mt. Paektu, Mt. Chilbo, Mt. Jangja, Masikryong, and Yangdok, authorities were tasked with facilitating more domestic group excursions to the recreation and heritage sites.<sup>38)</sup> In the capital, the

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36) *Rodong Sinmun*, “Lodging Houses Admirably Refurbished,” December 5, 2020 (in Korean); Colin Zwirko, “North Korean Ski Resort Prep for Tourists Despite Virus, Economic Concerns,” *NKNews*, November 29, 2021; *Pyongyang Times*, “Province Builds Up Construction Force,” July 12, 2022. It was at this time, too, that the Jongbangsan Travel Company and its logo seems to have first appeared.

37) *Voice of Korea*, “Afforestation Brisk at Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Area under Construction,” April 16, 2020; *KCNA*, “New Tourist Battery Cars Produced,” May 12, 2020.

38) *Rodong Sinmun*, “An outburst of faith and will to persevere in the spirit of Paektu,” December 8, 2023 (in Korean); DPRK Today, “Revolutionary Site in Mt Jangja in DPRK Visited by Many People,” May 9, 2023; *Pyongyang Times*, “Three-Revolution Team Members Start Study Tour of Revolutionary Battle Sites in Mt Paektu,” February 9, 2023; *Pyongyang Times*, “Officials, Working People, Youth and Students Tour Revolutionary Battle Sites in Majon,” February 27, 2023; Jong So Yong, “N. Hamgyong Province is developing Mt. Chilbo into a ‘world class’ tourist destination,” *Daily NK*, November 29, 2023.

Rungra People's Pleasure Ground and other relatively new leisure facilities (e.g., water parks, funfairs, riding club, etc.) became the focus of increased publicity in the North Korean broadcasts and news media.<sup>39)</sup> Furthermore, at Samjiyon City and adjacent Pegaebong Skiing Grounds, the ongoing construction/refurbishment of infrastructure (i.e., new resort, two 10-story hotels, ski slopes, new train station near the airport, etc.) during spring and summer 2022 – the months North Korea officially admitted to in-country COVID-19 related cases among its domestic population, the virtual 'height' of the pandemic for the DPRK – suggest designs for tourism were not dropped but merely shifted and reduced due to resource scarcity.<sup>40)</sup> Finally, the newly built Yangdok hot springs resort, among other locations, received much media attention.<sup>41)</sup>

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39) Lee Hae-rin, "North Korea Promotes Pyongyang Tours to Locals as It Mulls Border Reopening," *Korea Times*, May 22, 2023; Seulkee Jang, "N. Korea Turns to Domestic Tourism to Boost Foreign Currency Earnings," *DailyNK*, June 23, 2023.

40) Colin Zwirko, "North Korea Building New Ski Resort in 'Holy Land' Near Chinese Border: Imagery," *NK News*, July 15, 2022.

41) *KCNA*, "Major Scenic Sports in DPRK," September 27, 2022; *Naenara*, "Mubong International Tourism Special Zone," August 22, 2022; *Pyongyang Times*, "Young Study Tourists Travel Revolutionary Battle Sites in Mt Paektu Area," December 12, 2022; *KCNA*, "Open-air Performance Given at Yangdok Hot Spring Resort," February 8, 2022; *KCNA*, "War Veterans Enjoy Themselves at Yangdok Hot Spring Resort," August 1, 2022; *KCNA*, "Yangdok Hot Spring Resort," December 12, 2022; *Rodong Sinmun*, "50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of President Kim Il Sung's Field Guidance Marked in Kaesong City," September 15, 2022; *Naenara*, "Pipha Iselt," September 15, 2022.

#### 4. Implications: Where to from Here under an ‘Our-style’ Socialist Tourism Program?

North Korea’s border closure in January 2020 has meant that the country’s tourism sites have received only domestic travelers for the past four years. Rumors of a reopening to international tourists resurfaced periodically during the pandemic, yet the lack of progress on construction of the major leader-led tourism projects made the return of an international tourism program and recovery of sectoral development opaque.<sup>42)</sup> Not until fall of 2023 after a reopening of its borders to a few select Russian and Chinese political delegations earlier that summer did the DPRK announce a new law adopted for the purpose of revitalizing domestic tourism and expanding international tourism, with a call to ensure the convenience of tourists and protection of the natural environment.<sup>43)</sup> In February 2024, the first international tourists entered the country – just under 100 Russian tourists. With the regime’s concerns about the domestic masses, and the challenges stemming from the changing global order, in what direction is North Korea poised to go with its tourism revitalization?

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42) Makowsky et al., “North Korea’s Tourism Industry” (2023).

43) *Rodong Sinmun*, “Plenary Meeting of DPRK SPA Standing Committee Held,” September 1, 2023.

## 1) Propaganda

Tourism has a propaganda function, both external and internal, and this is especially true of socialist North Korea. During the pandemic years, domestic tourism did occur, with internal media pushing a few key facilities that push a ‘winter’ theme and sites connected to the leader’s image branding: the resorts and revolutionary sites at Yangdok, Masikryong, and Mt. Paektu. The ski facilities at Yangdok and Masikryong conducted snowmaking and other activities to prepare for and receive domestic visitors over the 2021–2022 winter seasons.<sup>44)</sup> Hence, despite the absence of international tourists and subsequent foreign currency earnings to such locations, North Korea continued to entertain domestic travelers. This meshes with one of the economic priorities of tourism development under a ‘Stalinist’ model of development – that is, improvements in infrastructure benefitting the domestic population more than foreign visitors<sup>45)</sup> – and North Korea’s own announced functions of ‘socialist tourism’ development – i.e., contribution to satisfying the material comforts and cultural living of the North Korean masses.<sup>46)</sup> Reports also suggest that the privileged residing in the capital were said to even be willing to pay for the chance

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44) Colin Zwirko, “North Korean Ski Resorts Prep for Tourists, Despite Virus and Economic Concerns,” *NK News*, November 29, 2021.

45) Derek R. Hall, “Stalinism and Tourism” (1990).

46) For explanation of North Korea’s ‘Socialist’ tourism program and policy, see Ouellette, “Survivalist North Korea’s Selective Tourism” (2022).

to view the tourism-related event, the Mass Games — the program of which can change, and in 2020 focused more on celebration of the North Korean communist party.<sup>47)</sup> By promoting cultural heritage, tourism serves to promote not only a national identity and positive national image (internationally) but also social cohesion (domestically). For the security-conscious Kim-family regime, the propaganda function is more significant and the ‘perceived’ threats to the socialist system caused by tourism opening are not taken lightly. Past leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il expressed suspicions about tourism as a potential ‘hot bed’ for spreading in DPRK society ‘decadent culture’ — that is, anything alien that contravenes Party dictates or frays the ‘our-style’ socialist fabric of society. Because tourism is an industry that demands contact and mobility of the people, and their various association, it harbors the potential to be a conduit of corruption among the cadres and workers privileged enough to be permitted to work in the tourism and hospitality sector — as the abovementioned incident at Wonsan in 2022 attests. This is true even without the presence of international tourists. Thus for a personalist-authoritarian socialist regime like North Korea, the ideological and political risks of tourism development can be high.

Under Kim, North Korea promoted national heritage on a global level by revising heritage laws to better reflect UNESCO ‘world heritage’

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47) Ha Yoon Ah, “Pyongyangites willing to pay to see “Great Guidance” performance,” *Daily NK*, October 15, 2020.

conventions, thus demonstrating the regime's desire to be seen as a 'modern' international nation-state.<sup>48</sup>) This heritage component is probably more important to the regime to promote social cohesion. But as the industry expands, manpower needs to expand, and this can lead to problems. For example, on the one hand, Wonsan is being built as an 'international tourist city', and expected thus to reap in tourist dollars, build the local economy, and benefit from the tacit knowledge transfers. Young people staff the tourism and hospitality industry. But the Wonsan-Kalma tourist area fell off the media's radar during the pandemic, as the project lingered in limbo; only after reopening to Russian tourists did the zone show signs of resuming construction plans to their completion.<sup>49</sup>) However, youth will eventually staff this industry once it comes online in the future to serve international guests — which would speculatively likely be Russian and Chinese tourists. Making sure these youths are of an 'ideologically' sound mind will be a focus of the regime, and high competition for such prestigious

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48) Jihon Kim and Myoung-Shin Kim, "Changes in North Korea's Heritage Law and Policy in Relation to UNESCO World Heritage during Kim Jong-un's Regime," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 30, Issue 3 (2024), pp. 289-303. Also, for discussion of the Kim regime's "hybridized" uses of symbolic 'space' for showing a national vision as a means to govern the people, revealing both his compromises to the public and the uniqueness of North Korean society, see Jini Kim, "The Formation of Governing Space and Strategies in the Kim Jong-un Era: Hybridization of the Supreme Leader System and Socialist Civilization," *Review of North Korean Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2023), pp. 8-44.

49) Colin Zwirko, "North Korea preps for major construction near Wonsan Kalma beach resort: Imagery," *NK Pro*, March 4, 2024.

employment will help facilitate this effort. Amid the ongoing border closure, the Kim regime appears to have turned its attention to instilling loyalty in the youth. The patriotism campaigns are good examples of the use of domestic tourism for propaganda purposes toward the youth.

To some extent, the regime also turned its attention to the military. In the DPRK, at Wonsan-Kalma the local military airfield was civilianized, yet Wonsan still remains a heavily militarized zone, where artillery drills are held. Presumably, some compromises were made by the leadership/Party to the military in order to turn Wonsan-Kalma into a coastal tourist zone — just as a compromise had been made by Kim Jong Il back in the late 1990s and early 2000s to allow for the Mt Kumgang tourism project and Kaesong Industrial Complex to open. For example, to placate the military the dual use of international tourism facilities became quite apparent when in February 2023, in celebration of Korean People’s Army foundation day, Kim Jong Un, with his daughter in attendance, held a banquet with KPA officials at North Korea’s largest hotels, the Yanggakdo Hotel, which is most known for accommodating foreign tourists (particularly from China), yet publicized the venue as the KPA general officers’ “lodging quarters.”<sup>50)</sup> Indeed, just like communist Cuba, in the DPRK the military is involved in some capacity in the tourism industry. The country’s international carrier (Air Koryo) that brings in international tourists is widely believed to be

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50) Chad O’Carroll, “Why Kim Jong Un Held a Banquet at Pyongyang’s Biggest Hotel for Foreigners,” *NK News*, February 8, 2023.



run by the military. The army's presence at the Wonsan International Friendship Airshow held in 2016 and operation of ultralight rides and tandem parachuting as tourism activities also reveal its involvement.<sup>51)</sup> Although speculative at this point, for the development at Wonsan-Kalma, North Korea may decide to follow the Cuba model to some degree.<sup>52)</sup> In North Korea, the currency-earning potential can still be controlled by the Party via the 'system of protection of the leader (Suryong)'.<sup>53)</sup>

Externally, tourism may still loom large in the leader's agenda for economic development and interactions with the international community. North Korea's submission of its "Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (hereafter, VNR) to the United Nations in June 2021 is suggestive of this underlying interest.<sup>54)</sup> This document links the country's ongoing tourism development to an international sustainable development agenda, which at some point Pyongyang will look to

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51) For details, see Ouellette, *North Korean Tourism* (2017).

52) It is a well-known fact that the Cuban Revolutionary Army owns and profits from the majority of hotels in Cuba. Evan Dyer, "The Cuban Military owns the majority of Cuba's hotels, CBC News, August 3, 2021.

53) For explanation of the system of protection and how foreign currency earnings of all state-owned entities are controlled, see Bong Dae Choi, "The Political Embeddedness of Enterprise Reform under the Kim Jong Un Regime," *Review of North Korean Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2023), pp. 8-50.

54) Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development," June 2021.

exploit.<sup>55)</sup>

Furthermore, one cannot forget the importance of the Chinese market to North Korea's nascent tourism industry. During the COVID pandemic, North Korea has maintained 'public diplomacy' efforts targeting the Chinese public. The propaganda itself has changed, becoming more modern and 'Western', featuring youthful spokespeople in more modern, trendy fashions. For example, the 'DPRK VLOG', a YouTube channel, features modern-style reality broadcasts spoken in Chinese promoting DPRK culture, including food and festivals; modernization, including sites like the Sci-Tech Complex, as well as new housing units. Short videos report on changes in Pyongyang, like construction of new housing units; explain cultural festivals, like the lunar New Year (e.g., 'Korean folk Sangwon festival', posted February 20, 2022), and even introduce new female Vloggers, announcing their new Weibo and YouTube accounts (e.g., 'My first video, Yang Yixin Vlog', posted May 28, 2022). The female hosts of these Vlogs speak in Chinese. In some of the videos, vloggers pay tribute to China (e.g., compliment China for successfully hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics) and its culture. Channels like 'New DPRK' exist on the Chinese platforms Bilibili and Weibo. DPRK also has posted on social media platforms like the

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55) For discussion of North Korea's sustainable development from the perspective of urban sustainability and tourism, see Dean J. Ouellette, "Tourism Development and the Quest for Sustainable Urban Development in North Korea," in Pavel Em, ed., *Pursuing Sustainable Urban Development in North Korea* (Routledge, forthcoming 2024).

Chinese-based Tik Tok, Weibo, and Bilibili.<sup>56)</sup> Even social media in Taiwan still promotes DPRK culture, targeting and attracting the youth, presumably for future tourism purposes.<sup>57)</sup> As the international order evolves under this paradigm shift, North Korea's interactions with Western democracies and their populations — including South Korea and Japan — will likely continue to diminish.

While Russian nationals have been the first group selected to enter the DPRK tourist sites, the size of this market has always been quite small — only 727 and 724 Russians traveled to North Korea for tourism purposes in 2018 and 2019, respectively.<sup>58)</sup> This pales in comparison to past Chinese arrivals to the DPRK. Undoubtedly, for sustainability and any serious profitmaking, North Korea will once again need to return Chinese tourist flows to pre-pandemic levels. Thus the future of the DPRK tourism industry will rely on tourist flows from China — its largest market — as it has in the past, and include outreach to Russia to exhibit political solidarity between two authoritarians, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un — although the size of this market suggests its

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56) Colin Zwirko, “New North Korean vlogger pushes propaganda via TikTok copycat,” *NK News*, December 28, 2022.

57) For Taiwan, see <https://theinitium.com/article/20220621-taiwan-north-korea-fanpage/>, as reported on the website ‘Crossing Borders’ (a Christian, ‘faith-based’ nonprofit claiming to offer assistance to North Korean refugees and their children), at <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/blog/north-korea-gets-creative-with-state-propaganda/2022/7/13>.

58) Anton Sokolin, “Why Russian airlines may be eyeing routes to North Korea amid burgeoning ties,” *NK News*, November 29, 2023.

symbolic nature.

In sum, the tourism will function readily for propaganda purposes. Externally, it will function less for signaling peace toward the West as it did in the early years of the Kim Jong Un era,<sup>59)</sup> and more for signaling solidarity with ‘friendly nations’ that the Kim regime seeks to leverage — Russia being the key one in this regard at this time.

## 2) National Development

*Youth and Employment* – Generally speaking, for any state-led tourism industry, the economic benefits from tourism are varied and comprehensive, including income generation, earning foreign currency, employment creation, contribution to state revenue, hinterland development, and so forth. The industry has significant linkages to various other sectors including agriculture and the environment. Under the DPRK ‘our-style’ Socialist tourism, tourism is to contribute to the national development by virtue of its (rather fragmented, restricted, and inchoate) interconnection with other economic sectors, particularly construction, transportation, light industry, and even agriculture (and fisheries). Tourism and hospitality is also a service industry, with important domestic linkages to various groups. The employment opportunities alone, and the connection to domestic companies, cannot

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59) Tim Beal, “From Pilgrimage to profit: N. Korea’s Search for Tourism Revenue,” *NK News*, August 26, 2015.

be overlooked, especially for the youth — who are most important to the Kim regime in maintaining the Party and developing the State.<sup>60)</sup>

During the pandemic, the tourism-related hospitality industry received far fewer customers, and much of the dedicated manpower and material resources for construction at major projects at Wonsan-Kalma and Samjiyon-Mt. Paektu, as well as Mt. Kungang, were redirected elsewhere. Nevertheless, North Korea's continuing publicity of the hospitality sector, and revelations of its further expansion during the pandemic years would seem to indicate that this sector has remained important, especially in terms of female employment. Case in point, not until May 2020 did North Korean state media reveal the existence of the Pyongyang Service Industry University,<sup>61)</sup> which represents an expansion of the manpower development for hospitality. Reporting this during the pandemic and border closure implies the industry retains some significance for the regime. As for the construction labor force, as of March 2024, the youthful soldier-builders were reportedly returning

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60) As asserted by Kim Jong Un, "Bearing in mind that developing the youth movement is most important in strengthening the Party and the State and it is a strategic demand of the revolution, Party and youth league organizations at all levels should bring up young people into a reserve force, advance group and wing of our Party and thereby add eternal brilliance to its exploits in building a youthful power." Kim Jong Un, "The Paektusan Hero Youth Power Station Is a Proud and Grand Monument to Our Youth and Symbol of Youth Power," Speech delivered at the inauguration ceremony of the Paektusan Hero Youth Power Station, October 3, 2015.

61) Colin Zwirko, "Classes begin at new North Korean hospitality school, state media says," *NK News*, May 20, 2020.

to complete the projects at Wonsan-Kalma.

A successful tourism industry manifests many variables, but two specifically: contact and mobility. North Korea's social policy – the state's surveillance of the population, suppression of association, opposition to foreign influences, strict cultural homogeneity, etc. – mean that loosening the reins on these two variables have always posed a challenge for the Kim-family regime. The COVID-19 pandemic has further compromised the expanding of contact with North Koreans and mobility in the country and among the North Koreans themselves. A post-pandemic world will allow contact and mobility again, but on a much more cautious, limited scale.

In their call to revitalize tourism, one North Korean academic specifies the importance of the tourism guide service, explaining that information service they provide and how important it is for these workers to have knowledge of every aspect of the services to be provided, as well as the different target consumers, so to be able to interact and offer service according to an understanding of the consumers' peculiarities.<sup>62)</sup> Essentially, these workers are privileged because they are afforded the opportunity to interact with foreigners and the service workers from other sectors, and required to know the customs and cultures of the foreign tourists and the specific information from these other domestic service industries (and locals) in order to offer

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62) Kang Nam Chul, "Characteristics of Tourism Information Service," *Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, No. 1 (Issue 110) (2021), pp. 32-33.

the best service in the spirit of a ‘socialist’ tourism service worker.<sup>63</sup> By expanding this workforce, Kim Jong Un is affording a greater number of his loyal youth workers information from the outside, interaction with the outside and inside, meeting their demands to know more, satisfying their curiosity.

*National Goals* – North Korea’s tourism SEZs are not integrated into the national economy, but rather idle as stand-alone outposts of economic activity. And although SEZs are generally set up to signal economic openness and attract foreign direct investment (FDI), North Korea’s tourism SEZs, while mostly targeting Chinese capital investment, have floundered. The Kyongwon County local authorities’ plan for trade and tourism promotion with companies of northeastern China is emblematic of the problems North Korean SEZs face in realizing local authorities’ visions and SEZs’ potential: the lack of North Korean business partners, ineffective local institutions, inefficient implementation of regulations, and paucity of essential infrastructure all serve as rather insuperable handicaps.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, such SEZs are a part of the leader-led economic development, and so hold the potential for future use if and when circumstances change to promote economic development (e.g., if sanctions enforcement diminishes under the changing global order).

While Kim Jong Un did endorse tourism as one of the country’s

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63) Ouellette, *North Korean Tourism* (2017), pp. 167–168.

64) Hasting, *A Most Enterprising Country* (2016), pp. 144–145.

major industries, in North Korea's VNR 2021, tourism is not listed as one of its priority areas, although it features as a part of several national goals.<sup>65)</sup> Tourism seems to remain on the margins of economic

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65) Among its national development goals listed in the VNR, it mentions or refers to tourism in several goals and their targets: Goal #1 ("Consistently improve the people's living standard"), it mentions as a target that "By 2030, increase systematically number of splendid, modern bases for cultural and leisure activities for people and further consolidate people-oriented policies including paid leave, recuperation and relaxation systems at state expense" — which resonates with what Kim Il Sung mentioned back in 1982 when he had expressed his desire to transform Wonsan into an international tourist city; Goal #8 ("Establish self-reliant knowledge-based economy and ensure decent and productive work for all"), it mentions as a target that "By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism by promoting unique development of local industries and cooperative enterprises"; in Goal #11 ("Provide people with conditions and environment for leading more affluent, satisfactory and civilized life"), "Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage" — which in many cases are tourism sites — and "By 2030, build sufficient numbers of, and more splendid, modern bases for cultural and leisure activities for all"; Goal #12 ("Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns"), "Ensure sustainable development for tourism through [sic], including construction of Wonsan Kalma Coastal Tourist Area"; Goal #14 ("Conserve and sustainably use coasts, seas and marine resources for sustainable development — which is itself directly linked to tourism by virtue of the nature of the Wonsan development; and Goal #17 ("Develop friendly and cooperative relations with all countries friendly to us under the ideals of independence, peace and friendship, and promote South-South cooperation"), "Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge-sharing on mutually agreed terms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism" — which by virtue of the fact that such will require at some point



thinking and not fully integrated in the national economic development, despite proclamations to develop tourism with the local characteristics. To its credit, the DPRK does acknowledge that “tourism is vitalized in several areas . . . but the share of tourism income in GDP is low and the potential for tourism has not been developed properly,” while also stating the importance of reducing distinctions between economic sectors, increase economic management efficiency, and the need to “classify the economic sectors and processes, determine indicators and establish regular data collection system according to the international standards for measuring indicators of the economic growth.”<sup>66)</sup> In this report, the DPRK reported tourism direct GDP as a proportion of the total GDP and in growth rate as 0.16 percent in 2015, 0.23 percent in 2018, and 0.0063 percent in 2020 (the first year of the COVID pandemic/border closure). For its indicators and values for 2015–2030, no figures were provided for other relatedly important statistics, like passenger and freight volumes by mode of transport, and number of sustainable tourism strategies or policies and implementation action plans; only number of natural monuments, which tend to also serve as tourist attractions/sites, were published as a figure (i.e., 415 in 2015, and 429 in both 2018 and 2020).<sup>67)</sup> This vagueness reinforces the perception that tourism is not fully viewed as something the authorities truly

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and to some level human exchanges, hence visits to the country. See DPR Korea, “Voluntary National Review” (2021), pp. 51–57.

66) *Ibid.*, p. 31.

67) *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

desire to integrate with the national economy, but rather keep segmented.

### 3) International Tourism: Selective Markets

Domestic politics and geopolitics influence highly North Korea's foreign and trade policy decision-making, including on tourism. North Korea's foreign policy is showing a paradigm shift, moving away from trying to seek better, normalized relations with the United States, and instead more closely aligning with authoritarian China and Russia in an emerging multipolar world being divided on ideological lines: the democratic capitalism of the West versus the capitalist development of authoritarian China and illiberal states. The international markets North Korea may have sought to open in the past – South Korea, Japan, Europe, Southeast Asia, even the US – no longer look viable.<sup>68)</sup> Besides, long-haul tourists from the West (Europe and the Americas), Southeast Asia, and Africa have always been a minor source of tourists. As of March 2024, while North Korea has allowed Russian tourists access to select North Korean sites, 'normal tourism process' has yet to restart.<sup>69)</sup> Among its near markets, which tourists will Pyongyang seek

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68) For instance, the 27 EU members' unanimous call for further sanctions against the DPRK for supplying Russia with munitions for Moscow's aggression against the Ukraine almost guarantees the EU nations will maintain North Korea-related travel warnings. "EU leaders call for additional sanctions on N. Korea over military support for Russia," KBS, March 22, 2024.

to attract?

*Japan* – From its close proximity and North Korean diaspora, Japan would seem a suitable target; however, for that to open would require an incredible positive turn in the Japan-DPRK relationship. Even if the basis for travel was opened, at the basic level, counterpart North Korean travel company practices would need to change, as Japanese laws that came into force back in 2005 require all Japanese travel agents to reimburse their customers when planned itineraries are altered/unfulfilled, thus making North Korea an unattractive market for Japanese travel companies.<sup>70)</sup>

*South Korea* – The South Korean market is unlikely to reopen under present conditions – that is, structure of inter-Korean relations, denuclearization issue, fallout from the shuttered inter-Korean tourism, current conservative administration in Seoul, and North Korea’s bombshell classification of South Korea as its ‘principal enemy’ in 2024. Any revival of inter-Korean tourism would also be perceived as a violation of the spirit of international sanctions targeting North Korea. If reconciliation with South Korea becomes a consideration for Pyongyang, and some form of sanctions relief comes, the DPRK could also seek to reopen to the South Korean market by reopening the border crossing at the DMZ and offering enclave-type resort tourism once again. However, with the international order in flux, and the

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69) Koryo Tours blog, “North Korean Border Opening Updates,” March 10, 2024.

70) Atsuhito Isozaki, *Tourism in North Korea* (Tokyo: Mainichi Shimbun Publishing, 2019, in Japanese).

Russia-Ukraine conflict galvanizing democracies to stand up to authoritarians globally, the emerging multipolarity, and Pyongyang's hard shift away from inter-Korean engagement, neither North Korea nor South Korea seem to have any motivation to do so.

*Russia* – With the Kim-Putin summits and Russian diplomatic and economic delegations in 2023, and more recently Russian tourist arrivals in February 2024, all representing 'firsts' to enter the DPRK through Pyongyang's selective decisions, Russia already can be classified as one of those 'friendly countries' whose nationals will be allowed to travel to North Korea's tourist destinations. After the first Russian tourists came and went in February, second and third package tours were offered for March, and North Korea continued its outreach to attract Russians arrivals by participating in the 30th International and Hospitality Show in Moscow in March.<sup>71)</sup> Yet, as a target tourist market, Russia and its underpopulated Far East region is (and long has been) a small market in terms of tourism revenue. While North Korea will focus on growing this market as part of the newly invigorated DPRK-Russian relations in a multipolar world,<sup>72)</sup> it will be done so with

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71) Lee Min, "N. Korea set to take part in tourism exhibition in Moscow to lure Russian tourists," *Yonhap*, March 7, 2024.

72) KCNA, "Official Report of the Office of the Assistant to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Relation to the Result of the Visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the Russian Federation," January 20, 2024; Anton Sokolin, "Russia Eyeing New Rail, Ferry and Car Routes to North Korea: Ambassador," *NKNews*, February 12, 2024; Lee Minji, "N. Korea, Russia Sign Protocol on Sports

the political relationship in mind. This selective reopening may also portend a segmenting of the tourism markets into separate ‘friendly’ markets also as a possible way to mitigate the influence of ‘alien culture’. This is somewhat suggestive after the appearance of a recent news report in Russian reporting on the recent trip of Russian travelers to the DPRK – the first since the pandemic measures and border closure were put into force.<sup>73)</sup> But in terms of profitmaking, the Russian market pales in comparison to what the Chinese market can offer and has historically.

*China* – The Chinese market has been and is the largest market for the DPRK, and only real one of consequence from a profitability standpoint. Chinese tourists still offer the most sensible and realistic market of generating foreign currency through tourism that is ‘sanctions-compliant’, as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) may be the only significant market willing to restart its package tours to the DPRK. By May 2023, domestic tourism in China showed its return to pre-pandemic levels,<sup>74)</sup> a sign that Chinese citizens may be prepared to resume travel to North Korea once package tours become available. With the DPRK-China relations celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2024 – a year Pyongyang has declared as the year of North Korea–China friendship – it is highly likely Pyongyang will seek to restart Chinese tourism to the DPRK to pre-pandemic levels. On that note,

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Exchanges: Report,” *Yonhap*, February 22, 2024.

73) Vedomosti, “Primorye authorities” (2024).

74) BBC, “Covid: China tourism rebounds above pre-pandemic levels,” May 4, 2023.

both accommodation and recreation facilities in the newly ordained Samjiyon City (upgraded from a county) have been built. Propaganda about this area has been directed both internally toward a domestic audience and externally toward the Chinese and could expect to improve its market for Chinese tourists in the future, particularly for winter sports and Mt. Paektu tourism. While the major problems to development of the tourism industry have long been inadequate transportation and accommodations capacity, once the immense Wonsan-Kalma and Samjiyon facilities go online, a connecting flight from an airport in China to Wonsan-Kalma and another to Samjiyon airport could help to solve some of the transportation issues for these newer tourism SEZs, at least in terms of facilitating arrivals from the PRC. Several hotels in Pyongyang have also undergone extensive refurbishment within the last six years. Those three destinations can be the focus of a vibrant tourism reopening for Chinese holidaymakers.

Despite past frictions between North Korea and China, including among its citizens/tourists,<sup>75)</sup> Chinese nationals 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. Also of note is that post-COVID China is experiencing its own social problems/unrest, with hundreds of thousands of Chinese having emigrated to other countries — an

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75) See Seliger and Choi, “Toward a (Sub)Regionalization” (2020), p. 205; Radio Free Asia, “Chinese tower overlooking North Korea could be demolished,” April 5, 2024.

embarrassment to the CCP.<sup>76)</sup> For the Chinese Communist Party, the DPRK still stands as a reliable destination where it can allow its citizens to sojourn without fear of their possible defection. So reciprocally, the Chinese tourist still represents an ideologically safer tourist for DPRK authorities, and the DPRK as a destination offers an ideologically safer destination for China's leadership to send its tourists.

However, North Korea will be cautious with its communist neighbor. Firmly upholding the principle of Chajusong ('independence'), North Korea's behavior toward China suggests Pyongyang's reluctance to integrate North Korea economically with its big power patron so as to avoid further dependency that could place the country on an "advanced stage of 'Finlandization'" as seen in other weak states of China's near-periphery (such as Cambodia and Laos) in the Xi era,<sup>77)</sup> a fear of China that former North Korean leader Kim Jong Il himself is said to have harbored.<sup>78)</sup> Indeed, flows of Chinese tourists can and have been used by

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76) China's immigration department has sought to "strictly restrict the nonessential exit activities of Chinese citizens" since 2018 due to the uptick in Chinese citizens looking to emigrate (with more than 300,000 Chinese having emigrated in 2022).

Evan Osnos, "China's Age of Malaise," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2023.

77) Frisco M. S. Stevens, "The Great War Analogy and the Sino-American Security Dilemma: Foreboding or Fallacious?" *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2020), p. 685.

78) Mark Barry, "Threat of Finlandization by China Should Spur Korean Reunification," *NKNews*, June 6, 2012. In 1998, Kim Jong Il also expressed his disbelief in foreign direct investment and tourism as a means to rescue the collapsing DPRK economy (see Ouellette, "Understanding" (2020), p. 63). Presumably, Kim's remarks were in reference to the then newly created Rajin-Songbon (Free) Economic and Trade Zone, a DPRK response to the 1990s Chinese-inspired and

Beijing as a tool of statecraft, and as a coercive economic measure against other states, including North Korea (both during the Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un eras).<sup>79)</sup> Nevertheless, changing environments can cause apprehensions to lessen, opportunities to present themselves, and attractiveness or motivations to increase. Under Kim Jong Un, tourism has been one area that North Korea has chosen to selectively engage China economically. Ultimately, the risks and apprehensions to Kim Jong Un were outweighed by the payoffs that tourism development could bring economically, but especially in terms of legitimation of him as a leader, as tourism was molded to his plan for national modernization and growth. It also allowed North Korea to reconnect with its mistrusted yet only remaining patron and security partner, China, in a time of growing geopolitical and global uncertainty.<sup>80)</sup>

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UN-sponsored multilateral economic development initiative Tumen River Area Development Program (TRADP), which largely served China's regional development interests and which Beijing was eager to internationalize, although neither Moscow nor Pyongyang shared similar sentiment, and the project lost political momentum.

79) Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Eduardo Saravalle, "China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures," Center for a New American Century, June 2018; James F. Paradise, "China's 'Coercive Tourism': Motives, Methods and Consequences," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2022), pp. 31-68.

80) Ouellette, "Survivalist North Korea's Selective Tourism" (2022).



## 5. Conclusion

This paper examined the current state of North Korea and its ‘socialist tourism’ program by considering various internal and external tensions that have influenced the leadership and thus the direction of the country’s development and subsequently tourism’s (potential) revival. How North Korea proceeds with its tourism development, reopening, and expansion in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era will be a matter for close observation, for it will be one indication of the contact and modernization it is willing to offer its people — in part a compromise to the loyal middle class youth that staff the tourism and hospitality industries — and how North Korea chooses to engage the outside world once again.

From the viewpoint of the North Korean authorities, the policy alternatives provided by the pandemic and international environment presented certain advantages and disadvantages. Internally, on the one hand the pandemic served as proxy for shutting out the world, suppressing/regulating contact and mobility among the population in order for the regime to exert greater control over the people by reinforcing ideological purity/political loyalty among the masses. On the other hand, the regime is still faced with improving the standard of living for its people as the distribution and consumption disparities among the urban/rural and the social classes increase, who while potentially willing to show their loyalty, have more knowledge of the prosperity of the outside world and desire more materially. Balancing this will be the ongoing task of the regime. As for the external

environment, the intensifying US-China rivalry and Russia's invasion of Ukraine presented new opportunities for Pyongyang to improve political closeness with Russia at the leadership level and restart its tourism program selectively to its long-time communist neighbor. However, this renewed closeness with Russia does indicate Pyongyang playing Moscow off against Beijing, which may give China pause to restart the Chinese tourist flows to the DPRK and the foreign currency earnings that accompanies these flows.

Overall, the contact/mobility aspects of the tourism reopening will be cautious and limited, emphasizing political heritage and links with 'friendly' countries. Social changes within the DPRK may be impossible to reverse entirely, hence the regime must continue to offer more materially, including leisure opportunities in modern settings, as the younger generations it seeks to coopt especially display more materialistic tendencies. Tourism was pursued amid the modernization drive, which Kim Jong Un will likely continue. In this way, the success of the tourism industry's revival will require regime compromises to the workers it wants to control by offering them opportunities for working in the tourism and hospitality services, and willingness to reengage international actors like China and Russia — which it seeks to exploit politically and economically — by inviting those neighbors' citizens to once again come into contact with the tourism and hospitality destinations and workforces in the DPRK.

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## 관광정치와 북한의 포스트 팬데믹 세계에 대한 고찰

올렛딘조셉(경남대학교)

2020년 초까지 김정은 체제의 북한은 다양한 목적으로 관광 개발을 추진하면서 관광에 대한 개방을 더욱 확대했다. 그러나 사회적 변화와 변화하는 외부 환경, 이에 대한 당국의 대응은 관광을 비롯한 국가를 재편하고 있다. 그럼에도 불구하고 대유행 기간 동안 관광 개발은 포기되지 않았다. 대유행 기간 동안 북한의 관광 전망은 어떻게 바뀌었으며, 걸보기에는 주변적이지만 잠재적으로 중요한 지도자 연계 산업을 부활시키기 위해 북한은 어떤 길을 택할 것인가? 본 논문은 리더십에 영향을 미치는 다양한 내부 역학과 외부 요인을 고려하여 북한의 현황과 '사회주의 관광'을 질적으로 살펴보았다. 팬데믹은 세상을 폐쇄하고 전국적으로 고립으로 전환하는 대리 역할을 했으며, 정권이 국민들 사이에서 이념적 순수성과 정치적 충성심을 강화할 수 있는 시간을 제공했다. 관광 재개의 측면은 정치적 유산과 '우호적' 국가와의 연계를 강조하면서 신중하고 선택적이며 제한적일 것이다. 그럼에도 불구하고 업계의 지속가능성을 위해서는 통제하려는 사회와 착취하려는 국제 행위자에 대한 체제 타협이 필요하다.

키워드: 북한, 사회주의 관광, 코로나19 팬데믹, 관광 정치