

Choson – The Last Communist Retreat

There was once a prominent Choson (“morning-bright”) country in the Far East that had followed a preceding 400 year old Koryŏ (Goryeo: 10th – 14th cent.). At the times of the Mongols, Koryŏ (“Korea”) has become distinct from the rest of Asia – its capital lying in Kaesong (Gaeseong or Songdo: the fortress “city of pines”). Choson (1392–1897), however, with a new political center at today’s Seoul, had isolated itself, the same as her grand neighbor – the Ming-ruled China, stepping into the footsteps of Confucianism and Chinese culture, while concomitantly developing its own Korean culture.

The mystic land of “morning freshness / calm” underwent a series of turbulences in 20th century, experiencing the Chosen colony under Japanese rule and formal independence after WWII – however under the auspices of occupying forces of Soviet Russia and the USA. Both superpowers realized the strategic value of the peninsula, but their incompatible targets finally led to the establishment of two national states in 1948 and the Korean War in 1950.

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An armistice ended with the division of the peninsula along the 38th latitude, but not with a peace treaty. Both Koreas, in the west known as “North-Korea” (Chosŏn Minjujuŏi Inmin Konghwaguk: Democratic People’s Republic of Choson) and “South-Korea” (Daehan Minguk: Republic of Greater Han), are still at war. This fact has once more gained attention this year when a 300KG explosive torpedo from a North-Korean submarine had reportedly sunk a South-Korean military vessel on 26th March.

Unlike South-Koreans, who only recently had got a slight chance to touch the North’s marginal regions (Kumgansan) opened for an expensive cross-demarcation-line “patriotic-tourism”, tourists from Europe (but not from the USA) have been most welcomed by modern secluded Choson – a historically unseen Korea and the least experienced tourist destination.

While the US basis have remained in the South, the Russians have left the North since long, however they fully handed over the stone age communist state to its giant neighbor China. With modified Marxist-Maoist ideas the democratic people’s republic had virtually eradicated Korean culture, including valuable heritage such as Chinese characters. How helpful have they been to read the sinisized Korean language!

Lucky tourists from the free world should be prepared to get traumatized when entering the world’s last communist hideaway that keeps the most harshly guarded border in the world. But if unbiased, they may get a rare insight to life that beguilingly reminds of a historic period come to a standstill.

The Juche (Chuche Tower) in Pyongyang, shows Choson’s new calendar effective since 1997. Like Taiwan (Republic of China) Choson shows the same year “99” in the corresponding Gregorian calendar’s year 2010. It is, however, not based on a political event, but on the date of birth of god-like

leader Kim Il-Sung in 1912.

To feel in a year 99 and cold-showered with Choson's official "state-religion" Juche (the total replacement of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism) is like being in a virtual world without modern, westernized life. One may wonder how the younger generation – still hermetically cut off by globalization after the breakdown of Soviet communism – may sense "aliens" with their different appearances. Besides the few Europeans snooping into the sterile country, more and more tourists come from China. The giant neighbor has emerged as a capitalist monster to the north, providing space for unseen human trafficking across the world's last iron wall.

How this iron curtain looks like may be experienced on an excursion from Gaesong to the demarcation border, where heavy doors, electric fences, antitank obstacles and traps may magically be removed for a momentary narrow pathway to Panmunjom – the Joint Military Security Area of both Koreas, where the armistice was signed in 1953. The tragic place lacks of fear when approaching from the northern side, in contrast to an approach from the south. The state propaganda comes to full effect, but leaves an apocalyptic feeling. The border remains intangible, and the privileged tourists become aware of their freedom and their affirmation to escape the jailhouse they have paid for in shortest time.

Feelings become dynamic on the way back to Gaesong, the historic royal capital dominated by Mount Chanam topped by a monumental statue of "god-king" Kim Il-Sung. At the foot of Mount Songak the fascinating excavation site of Manwŏldae ("Full-Moon Terrace) Palace seduces into the times of Koryŏ Kingdom. It is a symbolic site as it stands for the political power of a first fully united Korean state on the peninsula. No wonder that the entire environment is embedded in a perfect "feng-shui" landscape, untouched (like everywhere) by dishonorable kitsch from western-style life, yet decorated by the omnipresent north-Korean revolutionary propaganda.

Walking tours are therefore recommen



ded to enjoy a refreshing nature – spring blossoms – the summer scent of pine trees – the colored leaves in the fall – silk-pure snow in the winter. And the memory of the historic Kŏmgang fortresses, the 10 km long Taehung wall or 10th century Buddhist temples.

With some basic knowledge on the peculiarity of Korea's history, the approach to the capital P'yŏngyang ("flat-earth") evokes prospects and speculations. Maybe the first impression might be the broad roads seemingly used by nobody, the baton-swinging military-style traffic-policewomen on crossings where

most of the day no crossing takes place except some shooing black official cars of the latest Mercedes Benz generation enshrouded in mystic silence.

P'yŏngyang on the clean waters of Taedong River has been a settlement site since prehistoric times, a grazing heaven for herdsmen from the cold north of the continent. Surrounded by a picturesque landscape it has served as the capital of Koguryo (Goguryeo: 37 BC – 668 AD), a kingdom extending far into southern Korea and northeastern China.

The spotlessly clean metropolis is an amazing, though unreal mixture of utopist architecture, reconstructed historic monuments and pleasant garden-parks, where not a single junky, thief, pissing-dog owner or otherwise disturbing person might be met, but instead groups of traditionally neatly dressed people singing, dancing or even inviting the rarely seen foreigner to join their folk dance.

The unusual tranquility may create some nervousness, probably disappearing on one of the state-approved excursions to other parts of the country, where two most outstanding highlights invite: the granite mountains of Kumgang ("diamond") at the southeastern border and the volcano Mount Paekdu.

... time runs out to experience this part of the world.

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