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Sojourn in Paradise: The Experiences of Foreign Students in North Korea

Alek Sigley *

North Korea is well-known for the intense social control it imposes upon its citizens and foreign visitors. This social control serves to circumscribe interactions between the two groups, limit the flow of information in either direction which may be detrimental to North Korea's propaganda narrative, and maintain North Korea's isolation from the outside world. Foreign students in Pyongyang are not exempt from such social control. However, they are granted opportunities allowing them to experience the country more comprehensively such as freedom of movement within the city and the chance to live alongside local students and interact extensively with their teachers. By probing the experiences of four former foreign students of Kim Il Sung University to examine what their social interactions reveal about North Korean social control, its mechanisms and limitations, this article attributes agency to people living under North Korea's system and complicates dominant paradigms of totalitarianism.

Keywords: North Korea; Social Control; Foreign Students; Late-Socialism

Kim Jong Il, father and predecessor of current leader of North Korea Kim Jong Un, summed up the country's strategy in dealing with the outside world through the dictum to leave North Korea 'shrouded in fog' (Madden 2017). A consequence of this is that foreigners in North Korea come under strict social control to prevent them from seeing beyond the propaganda façade that their hosts erect for them. Conversely, North Koreans they interact with are prevented from learning about the outside world, to mitigate conflict with the North Korean propaganda narrative. Most foreigners visit North Korea on tourist itineraries or as part of special delegations. Their movements and interactions are severely restricted, and they only stay in the country for a short period. By the time their trip is concluded, the most they will see are vague outlines in the mist. North Korea's foreign student community, however, reside in Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, for much longer

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periods, usually for several years. As semi-permanent residents, foreign students[1] have relatively unfettered access to Pyongyang and the opportunity to interact extensively with North Koreans over a long period. This provides foreign students with much more opportunity to explore the fog and grasp the 'hidden truths' of North Korea that social control is designed to obscure.

This essay is a case study from North Korea that investigates the mechanics of social control on foreign students within the frontstage—to borrow from Goffman's dramaturgy—of their interactions with their hosts. It aims to grasp the patterns of social interaction that occur between North Koreans and foreign students, exploring what they reveal about social control of foreigners in North Korea. It also questions how these interactions shed light on social control of the North Koreans they interact with while further considering the limitations in North Korean social control these interactions reveal. In other words, this research strives to complicate the perceived monolithicity of the North Korean system imputed by the paradigm of totalitarianism and re-ascribe a certain degree of agency to people living under the North Korean system by illustrating the ways in which they subtly subvert social control while going along with it. The findings of this study are preceded by a short summary of research into foreigners in North Korea; a summary of the three concepts of the frontstage, ketman and hypernormalisation that make up this research's theoretical framework; a description of the methodology used in this study; and the necessary background on the peculiar form of social control enacted upon foreigners in North Korea.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

While there are several memoirs dealing with life as a foreigner in North Korea (Cornell 2002; Harrold 2004; Everard 2012, being three notable examples), there has been little academic research on the topic—Fyodor Tertitskiy's (2014) thesis on the *hwagyo* (ethnic Chinese minority) being a notable exception. There is yet no research on foreign students in North Korea. Research has been conducted on internationalist and xenophobic discourses within North Korean media representations of foreigners (Gabroussenko 2012; Myers 2010), which has at times attempted to speculate how this may impact on the treatment of foreigners in North Korea. However, this research has done so only in passing and without the support of empirical data from foreigners in North Korea. This research offers such empirical data directly from foreigners who have extensive firsthand experience of life in North Korea.

Erving Goffman's concept of dramaturgy (1956), with its frontstage, backstage and roles, will form the theoretical framework through which to view social interactions between foreign students and North Koreans. The dramaturgical notion of the frontstage conforms neatly with the highly ritualised and scripted public life of Stalinist states such as North Korea. Indeed, several researchers have taken the term 'theatre state' from Geertz, extended it beyond its original meaning of state projected power through theatricality, and applied it to North Korea, where citizens are

additionally expected to partake in such theatricality (Ch'oe 2003, 28; Kim 2010; Kwon and Chung 2012; Ryang 2012). People living under such systems are compelled to act out political loyalty in the public frontstage and assiduously hide any behaviour deemed by strict social norms as deviant, relegating them to the private backstage (Figure 1).

Dramaturgy in this sense is a characterisation of social interactions between North Koreans but can also be applied to the situation of foreign students in a second and more concrete sense. That is, the system of social control projected towards foreigners is designed to prevent them from seeing the backstage. External Service (대외봉사; 對外奉仕), the protocol that North Koreans follow during interactions with foreigners, maintains the function of focusing their attention on the frontstage performance their hosts act out for them and, conversely, hiding the backstage from them. Their hosts, the *tongsuksaeng*[2] (동숙생; 同宿生; North Korean students who live in the foreign student dormitory alongside the foreign students) in the case of the foreign students, are quite literally a team working under central management and authority. This makes dramaturgy just as useful in analysing foreign student social interactions with *tongsuksaeng* as it is in examining the contexts it has been applied to traditionally such as workplace management and customer service, as in Moeran's ethnographies (2005, 2006). Dramaturgy's emphasis on mistakes occurring during performances will be a useful tool in theorising the slippages that foreign students noticed in the behaviour of the *tongsuksaeng* and other Koreans. These point to discernible limits of social control in North Korea. The *tongsuksaeng* performance also veils a second, secret surveillance role, and Goffman's discussions of lies in the performance, as well as discrepant roles such as the informer, are thus similarly useful in placing foreign student social interactions under the microscope. Various other concepts introduced by Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) are also deployed in this article and will each be summarised and applied when relevant. Dramaturgy in turn is useful for conceptualising agency because as

Figure 1 Kim Il Sung University Foreign Student Dormitory (류학생숙소; 留學生宿所), photo by Alek Sigley, May 2018.

Giddens (1981, 18) points out, it emphasises the agent's reason for doing things rather than seeking explanations in the system.

I borrow the term 'ketman' from Miłosz (1955), a poet who defected from communist Poland to the West in the 1950s, to label public performances of political loyalty in North Korea. Miłosz took the idea of ketman from the Persian phenomenon of pretending to be a more fervent believer in Islam than one actually is and applied it to Stalinism. His descriptions of the psychology of everyday life under communism in that era as 'schizophrenic' and pseudo-religious are readily manifest to this day in North Korea, which still substantially adheres to hard-line Stalinism. Researchers of contemporary North Korea such as Yoon (2005, 106) point out this bifurcation in people's consciousness, emphasising that defector interviews demonstrate that the situation there is similar to Eastern Europe under communism and that despite the state's attempts to reshape citizens in its mould, ordinary people still maintain an internal independence and critical awareness. Ketman, conceived as a frontstage performance technique, thus constitutes a key component of North Korean dramaturgy.

Alexei Yurchak's (2006) anthropological work on culture and everyday life in the late-Soviet period and his notion of hypernormalisation will also be useful in framing the behaviour of the North Korean hosts within the experiences of foreign students. Hypernormalisation refers to the way in which state rhetoric under late-socialism becomes ossified and removed from daily life as the system stagnates. The system becomes increasingly hollow as people lead dual lives, declaring loyalty to socialism one moment and, as in the case of the late-Soviet youth subcultures described by Yurchak in his ethnography, seeking outlets in bootleg vinyl rock records the next (2006, 209). Yurchak's approach is salutary in that it blurs any simple lines between official and non-official culture—pointing at universally human ways in which people learn to balance contradiction in their everyday lives, while going to great pains to move away from sole focus on the economic, to illustrate the ways in which state socialism became discursive and performative in nature.

I will henceforth use the term hypernormalisation to refer to the chasm between official rhetoric and everyday life and its manifestations in grassroots social interactions in North Korea. Yurchak's theorisation of late-Soviet culture is readily applicable to contemporary, post-famine, post-Cold War North Korea. As noted by Tatiana Gabroussenko (2008, 29), North Korea is 'struggling to postpone the "natural death" of Stalinism' and stuck in an awkward no man's land between high Stalinism and post-socialism. Its people have no choice but to learn to live with jarring contradictions between official ideology on the one hand and making a living on the other. These contradictions and the sense of hollowness of official rhetoric which accompany them are all readily apparent in the stories of foreign students. They emerge mostly clearly during dramaturgical failures in the performances that Koreans give for the foreign students on the frontstage.

Dramaturgy, ketman and hypernormalisation are each grounded in performativity, and this makes them amenable to being grafted together; the first being of a

universal sense that pervades all social interactions, the second being of a type that can be readily found under conditions where ideological loyalty in public is a continual expectation, and the third being specific to mature state socialism. I therefore do not stake the claim that such daily performativity is inherently unique to highly controlled and authoritarian systems such as North Korea and cannot be found in the West; rather, performativity takes on a more intensified and pervasive form under authoritarianism as a result of ubiquitous social control, because, unlike in the West, there are both comprehensive state-endorsed models for behaviour as well as serious penalties for those who refuse to act according to them. Nor do I claim that such phenomena are unique to North Korea, ketman first being observed in Persia and then Poland, and hypernormalisation being found in the post-Stalinist Eastern Bloc. By using the three concepts together I merely seek to show that North Korea is but one instantiation, albeit an extreme one, of relatively common social phenomena. The three concepts are also useful for theorising how people acting according to social norms half-heartedly, or even resisting them at times, does not necessarily entail disbelief in said norms or the ideology upon which they are based, as well as questioning the very binary of belief and disbelief. Dramaturgy, ketman, hypernormalisation and the performativity they each entail illustrate the manifold ways in which people may adapt and even contravene the social roles they play without rejecting the performance itself. Czesław Miłosz himself was highly critical of Stalinist culture yet still considered himself a socialist, not unlike the rebellious youths in Yurchak's ethnography. The three concepts, used in concord to analyse the case of North Korean foreign students, are useful analytical tools for shedding light upon the fraught and never quite neat relationship between state discourse, social control, and those living under it in North Korea through the common idiom and metaphor of the social as performance.

Methodology

The data and basis of this research come from semi-structured interviews conducted in August 2020 with four former North Korea-based foreign students who had completed their studies in North Korea and returned home. All four, whose names are rendered as pseudonyms, were recruited through my personal networks formed during my time at Kim Il Sung University from April 2018 to June 2019. In most cases, they were people I had spent time with during my time at Kim Il Sung University, and, evoking the autoethnographic dimension of this study elaborated below, much of the conversation consisted of recounting shared experiences.

The first interview with Alex from Russia lasted two hours. Alex studied Korean at Kim Il Sung University for two months in the summer as a short-term exchange student or *silsŭpsaeng* (실습생; 實習生) from a university in Moscow. The second interview with Bella and the third with Wang Zhao (王召) also lasted two hours each. Both were Chinese *silsŭpsaeng* who participated in a two semester-long Korean language exchange program for Korean language majors from their home

universities in China and were sponsored by the Chinese government. The fourth interview was approximately an hour long. It was conducted with an ethnic Korean Uzbek (*Koryo-saram*) named Kim Namguk, who studied Korean at Kim Il Sung University for three weeks during the summer through his university in Moscow. The interviews focused on their everyday lives in North Korea and their interactions with *tongsuksaeng*, teachers and ordinary North Korean people.

I conducted interviews via Zoom and Facebook messenger video chat functions but only recorded audio. I transcribed the resulting eight hours of audio interview into four hours of English and four hours of Chinese transcripts respectively. I then analysed the transcripts and arranged them thematically according to the research questions on social control.

The method used in analysing the transcripts was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is defined by Gill (2001), following MacIntyre (1997, 2016), who proposes that to learn about an organisation we must hear the stories individuals tell about that organisation. This approach, derived from management studies and research on schools, can be productively applied to foreign students in North Korea because their Korean interlocutors are working as an organised team acting according to protocol. Narrative inquiry will thus be used as a method for analysing the personal stories of individuals to reflect on wider systems and organisations—in this case the community of foreign residents in North Korea and their position in relation to North Korean society more generally as a category of people living under a unique form of social control. As a former foreign student, I myself took part in a dialogic process hearing and discussing the stories of the foreign students to construct shared meaning. The methodology applied here is thus collaborative and participatory (Gill 2001). This collaborative research approach developed through the process of data collection as the foreign students were intellectually curious and enthusiastically worked with me to reflect upon the pool of experiences as foreign students in North Korea. However, research conclusions are my own.

Our shared background as foreign students lent this research autoethnographic characteristics. Autoethnographic elements emerge in two respects. Firstly, my own background as a foreign student comes into play, highlighting the role of personal experience in autoethnography (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015, 1). However, as I am currently reserving reflections on my own experiences for a future publication, I do not deal directly with them here. Suffice to say, the accounts of the foreign students detailed here align with what I saw and felt personally. Secondly, each of the foreign students themselves engaged in their own autoethnography as outsiders trying to understand North Korea, reflecting the particularly acute way in which autoethnography bridges the perspectives of outsider and insider (Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2016, 73).

The end point of narrative inquiry was to piece together the 'larger story' that emerged from participant narratives (Gill 2001). As the foreign students' most vivid memories of their time in North Korea were mostly related to the *tongsuksaeng* and their teachers, this larger story naturally coalesced around the social control

which exerted a constant gravitational pull on their social interactions. As outlined by Gill, narrative inquiry does not deal with discrete events in an isolated manner (Gill 2001, 338). Rather, it is key to building 'wider frames of reference' and examining the thought processes that underlie human action in everyday life (Gill 2001, 338). Following this approach, I examined foreign student stories as a means of approaching the complex web of individual motivations at the bottom of social interactions between foreign students and Koreans, which plays a key role in understanding the practice of social control in North Korea at a grassroots level.

Background into Social Control of Foreigners in North Korea

Intensification of social control towards the local population through heightened surveillance, isolation from the outside world, restrictions on freedom of movement and expression, and a pervasive personality cult centred around Kim Il Sung (Chŏng 2018) following the solidification of his one-man rule from the late 1950s and 1960s also impacted North Korea-based foreigners. From 1945 through to the 1950s, foreigners in North Korea could move about unsupervised, interact freely with Koreans (Dmitrieva 2014) and even visit their homes. For instance, Chris Marker, a French photographer visiting Pyongyang in 1957, was allowed to walk about unsupervised despite being on the kind of media junket that today would categorically disallow free movement outside the officially ordained itinerary (Marshall 2017). The exact date at which North Korea began to separate locals from foreigners needs to be clarified in further research, but it is likely to have been 1967 at the very latest. This was when Kim Il Sung made a speech on the Monolithic Ideology System (Tertitskiy 2017), and the current intense level of social control of the local population came into place. From this point until today, foreigners' interactions with local people became tightly circumscribed, and casual exchanges such as impromptu conversations with North Koreans became limited by wariness and paranoia on the part of the North Koreans.

Conditions which now apply to limit interactions between foreigners and local North Koreans are multifarious and include restrictions on phone calls, emails and mail between individuals of the two groups.[3] Foreigners doing business with North Korea are only permitted to email the collective email address of their partner North Korean institution, which is strictly monitored. North Koreans are barred from accessing the internet, and foreigners are not allowed on North Korea's domestic intranet system, which further inhibits interactions between foreigners and locals. Moreover, North Koreans are prohibited from hosting foreigners in their dwellings, except for short, prearranged and supervised visits to model homes. Further control and limitation on interactions between foreigners and locals in North Korea extends from the fact that the only locals with whom foreigners are permitted to socialise are their North Korean hosts (Lankov 2013, 44), who are specially vetted and trained in External Service. Exceptions apply when foreigners must interact with North Korean locals during the buying of goods and services—although many establishments may

outright refuse to serve foreigners on an arbitrary basis. Such interactions are most often short and superficial.

Despite the above conditions limiting all foreigners' ability to interact with locals, the different sub-categories of foreigner in North Korea are granted substantially different levels of access. Tourists and other short-term visitors may not leave their hotel without two minders accompanying them. When they are outside their accommodation, they may only visit a narrow range of well-maintained, preapproved sites. Long-term foreign residents such as diplomatic workers, NGO employees, and foreign students, however, can go anywhere within the borders of Pyongyang City extemporaneously and without accompaniment. This grants them access to much more of the city and its people than short-term visitors. They can not only walk the streets of the capital as they please but may also patronise most shops, restaurants and service centres in Pyongyang that are off-limits to tourists. As a result, they have more opportunity to experience the backstage of North Korea and witness dramaturgical failure on the frontstage. In 2018, foreign students numbered approximately two hundred. They study at one of two universities in Pyongyang: Kim Il Sung University and Kim Hyong Jik University of Education. The vast majority come from China, with smaller numbers of Russians, Bulgarians, Mongolians and citizens of Southeast Asian countries North Korea enjoys relations with such as Laos and Vietnam. Westerners, defined according to the Cold War sense of the term, are few and far between. These foreign students enjoy even more privileges than diplomats and NGO workers, being the only resident foreigners who may use public transport and taxis without a guide. They also experience extensive interaction with their North Korean teachers and even the virtually unheard-of experience of sharing a room with a North Korean *tongsuksaeng*. This makes foreign students a particularly valuable subject of academic inquiry. There is also a country-based dimension to social control of foreigners in North Korea. North Korean authorities will not under any circumstances grant American and Japanese citizens foreign student visas, and citizens of states that are allies of America will find it much more difficult to obtain a foreign student visa than Chinese citizens.[4]

Foreign Students' Experiences of the Frontstage

I present the findings of this study within the context of foreign student experiences of the propaganda frontstage their hosts present for them. This begins with analysis of the contact foreign students have with official North Korean discourse in the classroom and continues with exploration of interactions between foreign students and *tongsuksaeng* who follow the party line in their conversations with foreign students. Through the frontstage, North Koreans enact social control on foreign students, attempting to inculcate them in North Korean propaganda while performing surveillance on them. Contradictions within this performance quickly emerge, however, leading some foreign students to resist in the form of silent mocking or sarcasm. When North Koreans impose social control on foreign students following the External Service rulebook, this social control meets limits which result in unintended outcomes.

North Korean-Style Education

The classroom is the primary venue in which foreign students participate in the performance of North Korean life. As Goffman emphasises in the preface to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956, preface), the theatre analogy contains one major flaw in that actors play their respective roles on stage while an audience watches on. However, in dramaturgy, these three parties—that is, two actors and one audience—are compressed into two, as all parties are simultaneously audience and performer. Foreign students are likewise not merely passive observers in the classroom but are actively encouraged to learn the North Korean role of outward-believer or, in effect, learn how to engage in ketman.

The experience is akin to the socialisation that North Korean children undergo, albeit adapted for foreign adults. Most foreign students study Korean language. The language classes are held during the mornings and afternoons, with evenings reserved for homework. Even beginner level students, who would in South Korea be spending their class time learning how to ask for directions or go shopping, are not exempt from education in ketman. For example, Alex from Russia, who was taking classes at the beginner level noted:

> From day one, we were reading propaganda texts about Kim Il Sung. The vocabulary was the kind you find in North Korean newspapers. It came of no use when talking with *tongsuksaeng* or teachers. Words like 'imperialism', 'socialism', 'capitalism', and 'dear respected marshal' [official epithet for Kim Jong Un]. 'Puppets', to talk about the South Koreans who are 'puppets of imperialism'. 'Orphanage' was another word we learned in passages about how Kim Il Sung cares about the country's children. 'Obituary' for talking about Kim Il Sung's death and his famous will and testament.

Kim Namguk, also at the beginner level, recounted some of the vocabulary he learned in class at Kim Il Sung University:

> In North Korea I learned the difference between 'Great Leader' (위대한 수령님), 'Dear Respected Supreme Commander-in-Chief' (경애하는 최고사령관), 'Supreme Leader' (최고령도자), 'Great Marshal' (위대한 원수님), and 'Generalissimo' (대원수님). We also learned high level literary vocabulary such as 'brilliant' (눈부신), because they were used to describe the leaders and their achievements.

Wang Zhao, who was in the intermediate level, described her texts as follows, borrowing a fantasy trope:

> They mostly revolved around the leaders. They were of that very exaggerated (誇張), deifying (神聖化) sort. They came down from heaven riding a white stallion (身騎白馬從天而降).

Bella, also an intermediate Korean student, similarly reflected on her experience of Korean language class, touching upon the ways in which foreign students undergo linguistic inculcation in the North Korean state-approved performance:

> From lesson one it was 'Great Leader' this, 'Great Leader' that. Texts about Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. In writing class we were taught that we had to write 'great'

(위대하다) in front of the leader's name. That was the only way to get high marks. We would get marked wrong otherwise. Through this process we learned to fit ourselves to their political requirements. We also wanted to avoid conflict, so we did it. This extended to when the teacher would ask us 'would you be prepared to sacrifice your life for the fatherland?'. Even if that fatherland is China. We felt we had to say 'yes'.

Foreign students continually write and enunciate North Korean propaganda vocabulary, which is highly scripted and ritualised. The official script seeps into their minds and bodies through classroom activity. They learn ketman and begin to feel the contradictions of living in a hypernormalised society. However, this education does not always achieve the intended effects. Both Alex and Kim Namguk remember a certain passage that provoked a humorous reaction. As Kim Namguk related:

We read a lot of texts about Mount Paektu [traditionally revered as a sacred mountain and purported birthplace of Kim Jong Il according to North Korean propaganda]. And I remember a passage about how students in capitalist countries shoot their teachers and take drugs.

Kim Namguk said that when he read this, he tried to suppress his laughter and 'keep a poker face'. When students returned to the dormitory, they laughed about it for an entire evening. Even though they thought such discourse to be ridiculous, they worked to manage impressions and maintain their front, hiding their derision from the teacher to preserve the working consensus (Goffman 1956, 4) so as to maintain harmony in the classroom. They learn to suppress outward indications of dissenting opinions in the frontstage setting of the classroom, thus partaking in ketman. Their poking fun at the text back in the dormitory itself is a form of out of character communication described by Goffman as 'treatment of the absent', where 'members of a team go backstage where the audience cannot see or hear them, [and] derogate the audience in a way that is inconsistent with the face-to-face treatment that is given to the audience' (Goffman 1956, 108). Such treatment of the absent was common among North Korea-based foreign students and helped to consolidate their intra-team solidarity, which was even more imperative since it helped to deal with the absurdity of the requirement to perform ketman. Regarding the need to preserve a working consensus with their Korean teachers, Bella felt the same way, as can be inferred from her above comment on wanting to avoid conflict. As a result, she began to feel internal conflict between compulsion to perform ketman and her conscience, itself a form of chafing against North Korean social control amid a hypernormalised society where official rhetoric is incongruent with everyday experience:

During classwork I wrote so many things that went against my conscience (違心), having to participate in their personality cult. When we visited the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun [mausoleum where the bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are on display], I thought it was horrible. But we were forced to bow three times at each casket. Afterwards I only felt fear but had to write an essay on how it was such a shame that the world had lost such splendid people and how we

> missed them. But I didn't live in the country during the years they were incumbent, how would I know about any of this? We were taught what kind of expressions and grammar to use to praise them, and there was no other choice but to write this way. It felt so coerced and I hated it.

The foreign students are thus drawn into North Korean social control as they partake in the mechanics of ketman. However, rather than shaping them into the intended loyal Juche subject, they instead experience ketman and the propaganda frontstage of North Korea as hyperreality, a postmodern blurring of appearance and reality (Baudrillard 1994). Indeed, there are clear parallels between the hyperreality of late-capitalism and the hypernormalisation of late-socialism, as both manifest a complex and contradictory layering of social reality where the lines between performance and non-performance are blurred. Because of this, the foreign students feel as if they are in a Stalinist Disneyland. Indeed the comparison with Disneyland does have some merit insofar as Disneyland constructs an elaborate façade and actively engages in performance in which visitors are invited to participate (Bryman 1999).

This demonstrates the limits of social control of foreign students through the frontstage performance of North Korean-style education. The way foreign students react to this may depend on their individual personality, however. While Bella was wracked with tension and despair, Alex observed the following:

> We found it all funny. You know like how our parents had to read stories about young Lenin in kindergarten. Young Lenin helping someone. Young Lenin being a great revolutionary at twelve. We thought all the stuff about Kim Il Sung was hilarious. And then they gave us all that odd vocabulary for us to write propaganda sentences with. So, me and Ivan were making fun of them. We were trying to compete to see who could be more orthodox North Korean. The sentences we made were all like, 'North Korea is the best country in the world. It will conquer Japan. Its nuclear program is the greatest and those arrogant Americans will one day vanish from the face of the earth'.

This recalls Goffman's discussion of false impressions, which outlines that falsity of the front is often less to do with discrepancies between the front and reality and more to do with whether the performer is authorised to give the performance or, in other words, is not an imposter (Goffman 1956, 38). Alex and his friends engaged in deliberate misrepresentation, depicting themselves as loyal supporters of North Korea, because they had no other choice, and this was accepted by the teacher as proper ketman. However, through sharing the exaggerated propaganda sentences in their classwork, they engaged in out of character communication broached by Goffman in his explication of secret code and derisive collusion between teammates (Goffman 1956, 119). Like the husband and wife who shoot each other knowing looks in the presence of an annoying dinner guest, Alex and his classmate's exaggerated behaviour in front of the teacher was a form of secret code. It was a particularly safe code too, given that openly questioning official North Korean rhetoric is *verboten*. This allowed Alex and his classmate to poke fun at North Korean propaganda and enhance intra-team solidarity without upsetting the working consensus with

their teacher. They surreptitiously turned ketman against itself, making it into a form of resistance against social control that was understood only by Alex and his classmate.

Education in ketman continued for the Chinese two semester-long *silsŭpsaeng* and for degree-seeking students, who are made to take part in a North Korean-style recital where they sing revolutionary songs about the leader and recite poetry and speeches with similar ideological content. They spend weeks practising for the performance and are trained by a disciplinarian teacher who makes sure they get their dance moves and intonation sounding just like the standard held by North Korean performers. As Bella relates, the students eventually switched off their brains to the content of the performance and saw it more as a chance to muck around and spend time with their friends. Even though foreign students are forced, unwillingly, into playing a role that they disagree with, they often find their own ways of exercising agency and consolidating solidarity among each other, which is itself a subtle form of resistance. The teachers, who have been practising ketman their entire lives, may well be aware of this. However, they are satisfied as long as the foreign students can give a convincing performance. This underscores the way in which North Korean social control of foreign students is largely about cultivating outwards behaviour on the frontstage. Foreign students are free to be themselves in their backstage (which is separate from that of the North Koreans), and it is tacitly understood that this is expected.

In any case, the North Korean curriculum did not always obstruct foreign students from developing cordial relations with teachers. Alex related that the classes made him want to feign sickness on a weekly basis. However, one teacher, whose classes were less ideological and focused more on Korean mythology and ancient history, redeemed for him the entire experience of attending classes at Kim Il Sung University. This points to foreign students becoming tired of and evading social control, as well as North Koreans sometimes loosening the degree of social control towards their audience. Bella fondly recounted one teacher whose teaching style was humorous and interesting. The teacher was thus much loved by all the foreign students he taught for appearing more genuine, as opposed to other teachers whose ketman overacting made their front come across as excessively fake, putting the students off. Nonetheless, foreign student attempts to express goodwill towards the popular teacher soon met a wall erected by social control, and subsequent interactions Bella describes highlight the fact that the North Korean teachers were on a different team, with a very different rulebook:

> The four of us wanted to invite him out to eat with us before we were to leave. But he said that according to the rules he could not eat with us. It wouldn't be good if other people saw. And on top of that we were female students. So, we suggested that we wouldn't have to leave the university together. Teacher goes ahead and we can come from behind and arrange to meet at the restaurant. We really wanted to do this because we liked him so much. And we were really going to miss him (捨不得). He's getting old, who knows if he'll still be around the next time I get a chance to go to North Korea? He's about seventy. But he said that to do that would really be

> testing the boundaries of his conscience. Those are the rules, and he must not contravene them. Even if nobody else saw, he would know about it. So, for that reason he couldn't go with us. We failed. We felt very sad about it. We didn't get a chance to properly say goodbye to him.

This situation recalls several aspects of Goffman's dramaturgy framework. Firstly, it establishes that the teachers are only allowed to interact with the foreign students in the frontstage setting of the classroom, and any fraternisation in a different setting, namely, a restaurant outside of campus, would be forbidden. It speaks to the functioning of frontstage control (Goffman 1956, 84) in interactions between the teachers and foreign students. Furthermore, while the teacher ultimately enacted 'dramaturgical loyalty' (Goffman 1956, 135) by refusing to go against the rules set out in his role, the anecdote also depicts a certain compromise in his behaviour. North Koreans dealing with foreigners are usually reluctant to even mention the existence of any rules governing their interactions with foreigners and may be more likely in such cases to give a prevaricating excuse such as 'I'm busy', or 'I have to take care of an ill relative'. Pointing out the rules is tantamount to divulging a strategic secret, in other words, a secret which exists to obscure the intentions and capabilities of a team in order to prevent its audience from adapting to the situation which it seeks to bring about (Goffman 1956, 87). This rule forbidding out-of-class meetings between teachers and students exists in order to prevent North Koreans and foreigners from becoming too close through backstage fraternisation between teams, and it is kept secret for the purpose of maintaining the false impression that foreign students have normal relationships with their teachers.

The teacher's divulging of this secret that there are rules was a realigning action (Goffman 1956, 124) that shifted, without obliterating, the line between the North Korean and foreign teams. It was a guarded disclosure that allowed the two parties to momentarily seek an affinity which cut across team divisions. The teacher had nothing to gain from this disclosure and did it for no other reason than to express to the students that their feelings of goodwill and friendship towards him were received and understood and, furthermore, reciprocated through a temporary lowering of guard. He would have understood that the students felt disappointed by his refusal to meet them outside of class, and he acted as the person in the superordinate position to reduce pretence and boost the morale of the subordinate party (Goffman 1956, 125) and engage in an 'indulgent moment of intimacy' (Goffman 1956, 126) through a rare moment of honesty. Although this often occurs in the case of the higher-ranking party receiving some benefit in return, in this case it occurred as part of an anti-dramaturgical social movement during what Goffman describes as a 'moment of chronic strain' (Goffman 1956, 130). This dramaturgical breakdown in turn revealed to the foreign students the hidden mechanisms and limitations of the social control that was enacted upon them.

This discussion of fronts and impression management within state-sanctioned performance, and what their discrepant moments reveal about social control, will

continue in the next section with examination of the *tongsuksaeng* performance (Figure 2).

Tongsuksaeng at Work

The *tongsuksaeng* are ostensibly in the foreign student dormitory to help foreign students practise Korean language and to teach them Korean culture. That is what the *tongsuksaeng* themselves, and the Office of External Affairs (대외사업부; 對外事業部; International Office) staff, would say about their role. Passages in the textbooks for foreign students contain dialogues where foreign students and *tongsuksaeng* play together as chums. However, this itself is the kind of misrepresentation that Goffman terms an 'open' lie (Goffman 1956, 40), that is, one which can be demonstrated to be false. The longer foreign students stay in the dormitory, the more evidence they gather that it is *not* the case that the *tongsuksaeng* are primarily there to be friends of the foreign students. They share this evidence with other foreign students, and eventually all foreign students know this to be the case. For example, Wang Zhao shared the following story:

> One time I was in the dormitory having a rest. I had my eyes closed but I hadn't fallen asleep. And then she [Wang Zhao's *tongsuksaeng* roommate] came into the room with the phone in her hand. I could make out the conversation. The person on the other end of the line was asking her my whereabouts. She reported that I was asleep. After that I realised that she wasn't there to be my friend but to spy on me, and gather information on me to report to her superiors.

This is one instance of such evidence that the *tongsuksaeng* are performing the discrepant role of informer. However, Wang Zhao already knew this before she arrived in Pyongyang after talking with her university Korean language major seniors who had completed the same exchange program. She arrived in Pyongyang with an understanding that the *tongsuksaeng* were 'carrying out a mission' (帶著任務的). For the purposes of maintaining their front and saving face, the

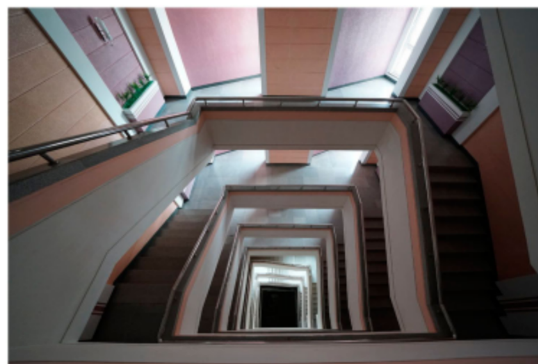

Figure 2 Kim Il Sung University Foreign Student Dormitory central stairwell, photo by Alek Sigley, May 2018.

tongsuksaeng and Office of External Affairs continue to insist that the *tongsuksaeng* are there to be friends with the foreign students. Members of the *tongsuksaeng* team are supposed to hide any such evidence to the contrary, as it would constitute destructive information (Goffman 1956, 87) that is detrimental to the image their team is trying to foster as friends of the foreign students. This is key to the protection of their primary dark secret, a dark secret being 'facts about a team which it knows and conceals, and which are incompatible with the image of self that the team attempts to maintain before its audience' (Goffman 1956, 87). This dark secret is the fact that their surveillance function takes precedence over any impetus to befriend foreign students or engage in language exchange. The *tongsuksaeng* themselves may not divulge this secret, but for the foreign student team it is a 'free secret' (Goffman 1956, 89), meaning they can share it among each other without any penalty to the image they foster as friends of the other foreign students. As a result, foreign students share with other foreign students this information that the *tongsuksaeng* are spies. In this case it is, as Goffman observes, that the free secret of one team is the dark secret of the other (Goffman 1956, 89). In the case of the foreign student dormitory, it results in the somewhat ludicrous situation where all the foreign students know that the *tongsuksaeng* are spying and writing reports on them, but this is never admitted by the *tongsuksaeng* and results in disharmony and loss of face if pointed out by the foreign students.

This naturally complicates relationships between the *tongsuksaeng* and foreign students. Many *tongsuksaeng* would like to befriend the foreign students and engage in language and cultural exchange with them. Bella described one *tongsuksaeng* who she liked and who got along with herself and her two classmates particularly well:

> Those two girls were both very cute. And one of them was very close to my two seniors. She was probably the one 'responsible' for them [*tongsuksaeng* are assigned certain foreign students to 'look after']. Her mother had a business producing dried fish. You know *banchan* [side dishes] right? She would bring them to my seniors to eat. And she would help them with their Korean homework. So they had really good feelings towards each other [感情特别好]. When the *tongsuksaeng* left they all cried. They were probably the closest *tongsuksaeng* to us foreign students. The *tongsuksaeng* treated them so sincerely [真誠地]. But the *tongsuksaeng* left really early. She said she was feeling sick and had to go see the doctor. After that she never came back.

This story reveals several facets of the dramaturgical nature of the relationship between foreign students and the *tongsuksaeng*. Foreign students often say that the *tongsuksaeng* who become too close with the foreign students are made to leave early. This technique is touched upon in Goffman's discussion of dramaturgical loyalty. Goffman writes about how filling station managers are often switched between different stations to prevent them from developing too close ties with clients (Goffman 1956, 136). This is done in order to counteract the 'danger of affective ties between performers and audience' (Goffman 1956, 136). Rather than being a part of a periodic changing of personnel, the rotating of the *tongsuksaeng* occurred

because someone reported on their close relationship. Either way, from the perspective of North Korea's system of social control, such closeness would be detrimental to the North Korean team as the *tongsuksaeng* might end up placing the interest of her audience before that of her own team (Goffman 1956, 136–137). Making the *tongsuksaeng* justify her departure in terms of sickness was itself a communication technique designed to obfuscate the falseness of the front they presented as friends, more specifically a 'white lie' (Goffman 1956, 40–41).

Bella relates another observation that was regularly made by the foreign students: 'The nice ones [*tongsuksaeng*] leave, and the ones that stay are fake, fake to the extreme. At first, we thought they cared about us. But after some time, we realised they were there to carry out surveillance'. These 'fake' *tongsuksaeng* were pointed out by most of the foreign students interviewed for this research, and I was familiar with them from my time at Kim Il Sung University. As related by Bella, they would show little interest in the foreign students other than to periodically visit their rooms and quiz them on their activities and whereabouts during the intervening period. In some cases, they would go through the foreign students' belongings while they were away and, while they were around, demand to inspect the contents of their phones to see what they had photographed. When foreign students got tired of them, ignoring their knocks on the door and minimising interactions with them, *tongsuksaeng* would instead spend all day waiting in the dormitory lobby to better track the movements of foreign students.

This is again a reflection of Goffman's discussions of dramaturgical loyalty, discipline and circumspection. In ensuring that the performance proceeds smoothly according to its intended goals, Goffman emphasises the importance of hiring 'disciplined, serious actors' (Goffman 1956, 139), which the university authorities found in the 'fake' *tongsuksaeng*. It was furthermore important that *tongsuksaeng* minimised the time they spent with the foreign students, because as Goffman points out, brief performances reduce the likelihood that the audience will see anything embarrassing or lead to unintended exposures of the falseness of the front they are presented (Goffman 1956, 141). From this we can see that the primary task of the *tongsuksaeng* is to impose social control on the foreign students through surveillance. This must be achieved without becoming too close with the foreign students, and the university removes those considered lacking in dramaturgical loyalty in exchange for other *tongsuksaeng* whose loyalty is more established. Meanwhile, the *tongsuksaeng* maintain a false front of friendship with the foreign students, hiding their surveillance activities. However, abnormal and contradictory behaviour of the *tongsuksaeng* eventually leads the foreign students to grasp this dynamic even if they had not already been told about it. Close exposure to North Koreans thus allows the *tongsuksaeng* to gain significant insight into how social control is imposed upon them.

However, at the same time, the North Korean system of social control sees it as important that they are protected from too much exposure to the 'reactionary bourgeois' ideas and habits of the foreign students and, conversely, it would be seen as

detrimental for foreign students to learn too much about the truth of North Korean society. The impression they project is thus contradictory: they are both friends and not-friends, they are simultaneously trying to insert themselves into the foreign student team while at the same time maintaining distance. This hampers their ability to properly perform their role as informers and they end up being exposed to all the foreign students.

This could be understood as a failed attempt to apply local technologies of surveillance to the situation of foreign students. North Korean informers would not face the same problem of having to limit their exposure to other North Koreans and in such a context can more convincingly give the false impression that they are on the target's team. The *tongsuksaeng* are unable to do this even when they are properly subjecting themselves to the rules of External Service, itself demonstrating the limits of North Korea's system of social control.

Considerations of impression management and the prevention of unnecessary fraternisation also came into effect in the situation of gifts. Going back as early as Marcel Mauss (2002), social scientists have analysed the ways in which the exchange of gifts is embedded into social relations and serves to generate meanings and affect that bolster social hierarchies. The gift also plays an important rhetorical role in North Korean propaganda, as life in the contemporary 'socialist paradise' is represented as a gift from the leader for which citizens ought to be eternally thankful, and as a part of ketman they must perform gratitude for this gift. Bella tells a story about how a gift from the Chinese foreign students to one of the *tongsuksaeng* came to signify their place in North Korea:

> We bought a lot of stuff in China to bring to North Korea because we assumed that stock would be limited there. Things weren't as bad as we thought though so when it came time to leave there was a lot left over. There was that one *tongsuksaeng*, the little, cute, friendly one who we all liked. We wanted to leave it all to her. There was a brand-new swimsuit for the Kim Il Sung University indoor swimming pool that we never wore, t-shirts, and sunscreen. The night before we left, we gave it to her and she took it. Then the next day at the airport, one of the other *tongsuksaeng* handed us a tightly wrapped bundle. She said it was a present. We opened it and discovered that it was the stuff we gifted to the nice *tongsuksaeng*. We had no space so had to dispose of it in the airport. And our feelings were really hurt [傷心]. We thought that there wasn't any need to do something like that [就覺得好沒什麼必要這樣的]. Maybe they are not allowed to receive our gifts. But I still had great difficulty figuring out what the reason really was.

This is another instance in which foreign students observed discrepant behaviour in the *tongsuksaeng*. Yet again, the requirements of External Service, which mandate that *tongsuksaeng* are not to receive gifts from foreign students, clash with the false front of friendship that the *tongsuksaeng* foster. This rule presumably exists also to hamper affective links between the foreign student and *tongsuksaeng* teams which may bring into question the dramaturgical loyalty of the *tongsuksaeng*. This in turn is to ensure that the *tongsuksaeng* are not distracted from their primary task of enacting social control over the foreign students. This failed attempt at gift-

giving is, however, another instance in which the behaviour of the *tongsuksaeng* came to inadvertently expose the mechanisms of social control directed at foreign students.

Conclusion

In summary, foreign student experience of the frontstage brings them into close contact with North Korean social control as they actively partake in ketman and experience having it imposed on them by the *tongsuksaeng* through surveillance and mechanisms which regulate *tongsuksaeng* dramaturgical loyalty. Foreign student practice of ketman, however, brings them to understand that ketman is primarily about fostering an outward experience of loyalty. Similar to Yurchak's (2006) description of hypernormalised late-Soviet culture, citizens enact loyalty to official rhetoric in order to grant them reprieve when they return to the backstage. Foreign students likewise perform ketman in the frontstage of the classroom and return to their rooms where they may even ridicule the practice of ketman itself. Others exaggerated ketman, surreptitiously turning ketman into its very opposite, that is, an act of resistance. This points to the limits of social control of foreign students through ketman.

Tongsuksaeng behaviour similarly had unintended effects. Foreign students quickly identified discrepancy in the frontstage behaviour of *tongsuksaeng*, quickly coming to doubt the *tongsuksaeng* front. This led the foreign students to avoid the social control the *tongsuksaeng* enacted upon them. What interactions they did have with the *tongsuksaeng* only came to provide more evidence for the foreign students of the mechanisms and rules governing *tongsuksaeng* social control. In short, even when teachers and *tongsuksaeng* pursued social control of foreign students according to the rules of the frontstage, this often had the adverse effect of the foreign students rejecting the front the North Koreans offer them.

North Korean social control may be the most comprehensive in the contemporary world. However, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, that does not mean it can reach into every crevice of North Korean society. The experiences of foreign students and their interactions with North Koreans amply demonstrate this and prompt rethinking of the totalitarian monolithicity that is often ascribed to the country.

Social control of foreign students in North Korea puts up substantial barriers to social interaction between foreign students and North Koreans and does much to obstruct foreign student views of the backstage. However, the glaring contradictions of life in hypernormalised North Korea, the foibles of the foreign students' North Korean hosts, and conflict between their different roles all precipitate dramaturgical failures when North Korean hosts perform on the frontstage for their foreign student audience. This in turn exposes the mechanisms of social control to the foreign students in unintended ways and affords them accidental glimpses into the backstage.

We must acknowledge that much of North Korea remains obscured in mist. Here we return to the fog, and we are forced to acknowledge that there are some things

which may lie obscured by it for some time yet. This research has shown, however, that behind the mist beat hearts not too different from our own.

Notes

[1] I follow North Korean convention in translating the Korean term *ryuhaksaeng* into English as 'foreign students'. Likewise, I follow North Korean convention in translating *oegukin* as 'foreigners'.

[2] I use pinyin for romanisation of Mandarin, and McCune–Reischauer for Korean. Exceptions are where there are commonly accepted romanisations that differ, for example, Kim Il Sung and not Kim Il Sŏng.

[3] A more detailed explanation of specific rules governing social control of foreigners in North Korea and how they affect the different categories of North Korea-based foreigner is provided in my honours thesis, 'Sojourn in Paradise: The Experiences of Foreign Students in North Korea', submitted to the Faculty of Asian Studies, University of Western Australia in October 2020.

[4] I came to learn the ins and outs of North Korean visas for foreign nationals first during my time organising international tours to North Korea from 2013 to 2019, and second during my time as a foreign student at Kim Il Sung University from 2018 to 2019.

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