

The Light and Shadows of the Korean Peninsula

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How many times have I seen an American expert pointing to a satellite photo of the Korean Peninsula at night and remarking that the striking difference between the darkness that envelops North Korea and the bright lights that illuminate South Korea, as well as Japan, symbolizes the insularity, the oppressiveness and the pathetically backward economic state of the North. The obvious point is that the brightly lit South is a model of progress, of technology, of democracy and of free markets.

This contrast between the light of progress and democracy and the darkness of dictatorship and ignorance has a certain aesthetic perfection that easily feeds the imagination of viewers; the narrative is intellectually predigested and it goes down smooth.

In the political debate in South Korea, this narrative is not seriously questioned in the media, among scholars, or among politicians.

The progressive politicians argue that we should engage with North Korea and invest more in such projects as the Kaesong industrial complex so that North Koreans can find opportunities for employment and South Koreans can make profits from the cheap labor and abundant natural resources that North Korea offers.

The conservatives argue that North Korea is a dictatorship and that it threatens South Korea militarily and cannot be trusted. They say that North Korea must first open itself up completely to the international business, and allow complete inspections of all its nuclear facilities.

But the assumptions made by the progressives and conservatives in South Korea do not differ fundamentally. Both are assuming that South Korea is more advanced and that a future North Korea should look more like South Korea where citizens enjoy a far greater GDP, drive cars, live in spacious houses with televisions and smartphone and produce K Pop hits that sell around the world.

Of course, it would be ludicrous to make an argument that North Korea is a model for others. The closed environment and the repressiveness of the government is no myth.

But as someone who has lived in South Korea for twelve years, I have been forced to admit, despite my hesitancy, that there is something seriously wrong here too. Whether it is the high suicide rates, the polluted air, the ruthless competition in schools, the deep alienation felt by young people, the extraordinary dependence on imported food and imported fuel or the tremendous numbers of the elderly who live in poverty, there are deep, deep shadows that cross all of South Korea.

There are two important points that are often buried in the shadows in the official narrative about North and South Korea. We need to look at North and South Korea from the ground up, not from high up in space.

I have heard from numerous South Koreans who had the opportunity to visit North Korea that they had a strong sense that something vital had been lost in South Korea when they walked through the small vegetable markets in North Korea, observed the modest décor in the clean-scrubbed hotels and encountered the unadorned and unpretentious behavior of the citizens of Pyongyang.

Such South Korean friends noted that women in North Korea, although they may not have the luxuries of the South, are also not under the same pressure to wear makeup and to compete with each other in consumption. There is not the demand for brand clothing.

South Koreans detect decency in the manner in which people treat each other on the street in Pyongyang. Many are reminded of the Korea of the 1960s and 1970s when there were far closer relations in South Korea between family members, and between members of the community. For that matter, the absence of automobiles, of youth addicted to cell phones, of endless advertising that drives people to buy things that they do not need or want for the sake of profit—all these aspects of North Korea evoke an original Korean culture that has been lost.

But there is an even more important issue that has been completely buried in the media of South Korea, and in our discussions about North Korea.

All the discussion by “experts” by journalists, about North Korea is based on issues involving economic growth, GDP, standard of living, production and consumption. According to these standards, North Korea is helplessly far behind advanced nations, and South Korea in particular. That means that South Korea can be the big brother and teach the North Koreans how to be “advanced” and “modern.” But all those terms are subjective and ideological in nature. The assumption made in South Korea is that wasteful consumption of resources is a positive and that it should be actively encouraged. It is assumed that it is progress to live in bigger, overheated homes and to own automobiles and smartphones.

But there is no scientific evidence, whatsoever, that underlies these assumptions. They are as accurate as saying that praying to the moon will bring rain or using leeches to drain blood will cure the diseases.

In fact, research shows that such behavior patterns focused on consumption can have profoundly destructive effects on society as a whole including deep alienation and increased levels of suicide and substance abuse. That is to say that the assumptions about what North Korea should become, and what South Korea has been successful at, are based on ideology, on unfounded assumptions and on a myth of modernity. The result is that South Koreans are convinced that they are successful even as profound stress and frustration sweep through

families.

When we approach this image of the Korean Peninsula at night using a scientific approach, this image tells a profoundly different story; the lights and shadows are completely reversed.

The overwhelming opinion among experts based on objective scientific analysis, not based on ideology, or profit, or warm fuzzy feelings, is that humanity faces an unprecedented crisis in the form of global warming (climate change) and that at the current rate we will be lucky if we manage to avoid extinction as a species.

There are numerous reports and books on the catastrophic changes in our climate, and the resulting extinctions taking place already. We can already see in Seoul that mosquitos manage now to survive until December, and often flowers are found blooming into January. That is just the beginning of what will be rapid, life threatening changes.

If we let things progress as this rate, the oceans will warm, and grow acidic until fish are extinct, deserts will spread until much of Earth is uninhabitable and South Korea, hopelessly dependent on imported food and on the export of fossil-fuel intensive products, will be devastated

So what should South Korea do if it wants to survive?

The answer is quite clear. It should start looking more like North Korea in terms of energy consumption and frugality.

It should stop wasting energy and be dark at night, the way it has been for tens of thousands of years.

It should get rid of all the useless lights on apartment buildings, end those electrified signs on commercial buildings, reduce dramatically unnecessary internal heating and end the wasteful design of high ceilings and concrete, glass and steel exteriors found in its buildings. It should go back to the traditions of frugality and simplicity that characterize much of its history.

South Korea should be dark at night. Its citizens must be aware of the tremendous cost of keeping its cities illuminated, in terms of the expense of importing fuel, in terms of the terrible pollution generated by subsidized fossil-fuel power plants, in terms of increasing global warming that is destroying the future for our children.

But there is a deeper, hidden secret. We have been fed a myth that Korea must grow, must advance, must consume and consume more to be modern, to be advanced, to be recognized as being special, as opposed to the unwashed masses of “developing countries.”

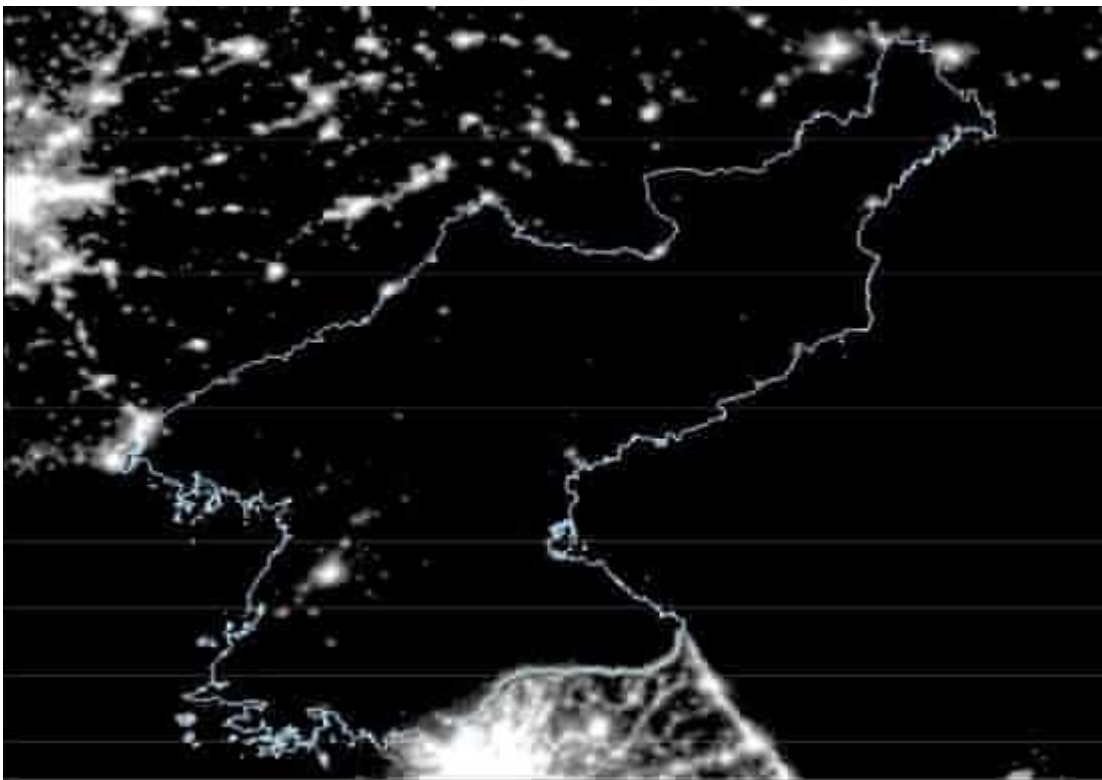
Becoming modern has been assumed to be the highest priority for generations. But what is modern if consuming fossil fuels and wasting natural resources is destroying our ecosystem and damning our children?

The numerous problems that exist in North Korea are quite serious, but from the perspective of climate change, South Korea should be benchmarking North Korea’s low-consumption, rather than planning to vastly increase consumption and build highways and expensive wasteful apartments.

Many people may find that my words sound odd, even nonsensical. It is so obvious to many that South Korea's modernity and its high level of consumption is a badge of honor, a sign that it is a member of advanced nations. Consumption considered as a major factor in calculating the state of the economy? If people consume less (and that means consuming less energy) then the growth rate will go down.

But if we are facing extinction because climate change, who cares what stupid things the newspapers tell us about consumption? We must stop subsidizing fossil fuels immediately. Those numerous lights that burn all night in South Korea do not represent cultural advancement, but rather a dark and dangerous game of living for the moment by sacrificing the futures of our children.

There are infinite meaning and depth, spiritual and personal experience, to be derived from talking with family and friends, from reading books, writing letters and essays, walking in the woods or putting on plays and musical performances for each other. It requires almost no and does far more for us than a jungle of smartphones, lit up Starbucks Cafes, or throw-away plastic toys and cups that we are given, whether we want them or not.



As we think about the future of a unified Korean Peninsula, we must first move beyond this dangerous concept that being modern and advanced is a priority. We should ask ourselves rather what does it mean to be human? How do we live a meaningful and fulfilling life and contribute to society?

I do hope that North Koreans can live in a freer way than they do today and that they can eat more nutritious food. Yet they will not find any nutritious food in the convenience stores that have taken over South Korea and destroyed the family-owned stores that once gave citizens economic independence.

But I also hope that South Koreans can be set free also from the invisible chains that bind them to mindless consumption, that force them to consume increasing amounts of coal (heading in the opposite direction of almost every country in the world) and that leave so

many feeling deeply alienated from friends and from family because of a brutal culture of endless competition.

The move toward unification must be about freedom for North Koreans and South Koreans. How unfair it would be if we assumed that only North Koreans are entitled to be free.

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Featured image: Seoul, South Korea, as seen from Namsan Mountain. strogoscope / Flickr

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