

The Dear Leaders Are Watching You



Everywhere in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), you will see the portraits of the Dear Leaders. In houses, in offices, in hospitals, in the subway. They are always around you.

If you look carefully, you will notice that the frames are tilted forward to avoid any glare that would make them difficult to see.

Only the portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are to be seen. Kim Jong Un does not have a portrait yet. They are sometimes accompanied by a portrait of Kim Jong Suk, Kim Il Sung's first wife and the mother of Kim Jong Il. When that is the case, all three are depicted in military uniforms and caps.

There are two versions of the portraits: one from the 80s which is a very stern depiction of the Leaders and one from the 90s in which they smile. Some say that they were the only people who smiled in North Korea.

The portraits are photoshopped – in fact, retouched by hand by North Korean artists – so they resemble paintings more than pictures.

People who get married receive the two portraits and sometimes a third one showing Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il chatting while holding papers in their hands. The latter is a really bad picture as it was taken with flash in an office corridor. When I asked my guide, he admitted that it wasn't a perfect quality picture but said it was the perfect illustration of the Dear Leaders working for the people, even when they were walking.

When you ask North Koreans if those portraits are not too omnipresent, they say that since they revere the Leaders, it is a pleasure to see them all day long. My guide even pointed out that many people in the West have crucifixes in their bedrooms, so he felt that it was the same...

The frames must always be clean, devoid of fingermarks or dust for instance. If you are caught neglecting to take care of your portraits, you may encounter problems with the Party or even be fined. I noticed that many portraits were dull because of years of sunlight but were not changed. It seemed to be a budgetary problem.

The walls on which the portraits are hung must be clean and nothing must be put around the portraits. They are sacred. I was surprised to see the portraits so high on the wall but that is to keep them out of reach.

There were no portraits in my hotel rooms during my trips. My guide told me that North Korean authorities were afraid that a tourist would steal them. I asked about buying one but they told me it was impossible, as is the case with pins of the Dear Leaders.

My guide also told me stories of North Koreans saving the portraits from their homes on fire as "they were the most precious things they owned and they would rather risk their lives than lose them."

I will always remember the night I returned to Pyongyang in my bus at night. We stopped at a crossroads, at the foot of a residential building. Looking up, I could see through the windows the portraits hanging on the walls of each apartment on every floor! A frightening sight...



There are two versions of the portraits, one from the 80s – as shown on this picture – which is a very stern depiction of the Leaders and one from the 90s in which they smile. Some say that they were the only people who smiled in North Korea.



The portraits are photoshopped – in fact, retouched by hand by North Korean artists – so they resemble paintings more than pictures. This version is the one in which they are smiling. Some say that they were the only people who smiled in North Korea.



A couple at their home in the Chilbo sea area, posing under the portraits of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Suk, Kim Il Sung's first wife and the mother of Kim Jong Il.

When I asked them where they wanted to have their picture taken, they chose this spot.



No, my picture is not blurry but I noticed that the further you travelled in the countryside, the worse the quality of the propaganda became compared to that in Pyongyang. These portraits are blurry probably because they were a cheap enlargement of the official ones.



Giant portraits in Kim Il Sung square in Pyongyang. The same pictures can be found in private homes.



Children at a school with their teacher in Pyongyang. The portraits can be seen in every school. The children talk about the Leaders as though they were their parents and are able to tell you all about their glorious lives.



In a VIP room in an official office in Pyongyang.



At the Grand Study House in Pyongyang, students work on computers under the watchful gaze of the portraits. They can access a local intranet.



In an English class for students in Pyongyang.



In the multimedia room of the Grand Study House in Pyongyang. You can listen to CDs of the Beatles, but always under the gaze of the Dear Leaders.



When you take the subway in Pyongyang to commute to your job, you cannot miss the portraits. The cars are very dark with little light, but the portraits are always lit up properly.



In Chonsam village, times are changing. These children were acting silly for me in front of the portraits. The teenager tried to make them stop as you must always respect the portraits of the Dear Leaders.



Children in a room at the Songdownon International Children's Camp in Wonsan. They come from the countryside and everything has been set up to remind them that they are able to enjoy their holidays because of the generosity of the Dear Leaders.



At an office reception in Pyongyang.





Accordion class at the Mangyongdae Schoolchildren's Palace, Pyongyang.



At the Kim Jong Suk School, Pyongyang.



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취 접 수

부인 1

천 대 성
동 력 포



부인 2

진 료 대 상

부인 3

모란봉 대동강 서 성

부인

보통강 동대원
선 교 롭 성

At the Pyongyang Maternity, you are welcomed by the portraits of the Dear Leaders.

북한인민
보건부
평양시
출생신고서
작성부서





Time to cook in Hamhung, never alone.



사리원시 미곡협동농장에서

Even when you are watching TV, you can see the portraits. This was during a news report on new apartments furnished with everything in Pyongyang, including the Dear Leaders portraits.



Even in your bedroom, the portraits are on the walls.

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