

Contact Across Chasms

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To Britons, North Korea is an alien world where a communist dynasty reigns, the populace starves while intercontinental ballistic missiles are test-fired, and where the US, Japan, and South Korea are almost daily excoriated in the mass media. It is also a place that has had a British Embassy since early 2001, headed by a resourceful analyst from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Dr. James Hoare. Late this past November, at the invitation of the British Association for Korean Studies, sponsored by the FCO, and arranged by Dr. Hoare, Oxford received its first visitors from North Korea.

They arrived in England for a one-day workshop on North Korean arts at the British Museum, visited Cambridge, and then came our way. They were not exactly the first such cultural group to visit the UK from North Korea, but they were the first to arrive without a political agenda hanging from their breast pockets. Mr. Han Chang Gyu, the Director of the National Gallery, was accompanied by Mr. Kim Myong Chol, Head of Department, Korean Cultural Preservation Centre, and by Mr. Kang Yong Min, a young researcher at the same Centre, who acted as interpreter.

I met them on a Friday evening at a reception in the British Museum celebrating the opening of a small exhibition of modern art from North Korea. The next morning at the Museum, a crowd of about 150 gathered for the day-long workshop on North Korean arts. Director Han, himself an artist, gave a lecture on modern art. His colleague Mr. Kim, an archaeologist of ancient mountain fortresses, gave a lecture on wall murals from Koguryo tombs (AD 4-7th century). I saw them again on the following Wednesday at noontime when they alighted at Gloucester Green from the Cambridge bus. Within minutes, they had settled into their rooms at Wolfson, and we were off to Hall for lunch. There, the young Mr. Kang discovered the delights of English mustard applied liberally to green beans. As we ate, they nodded approvingly when I pointed out the absence of a high table. They smiled politely as I rattled on about democracy and an egalitarian approach to relations with students. The afternoon schedule called for a trip to the Museum of Modern Art, the Ashmolean, and a lecture at the Oriental Institute by Mr. Han on Koguryo wall murals, followed by an intimate dinner.

Our first stop brought us under the kindly wing of Mr. A. Nairne, Director of MOMA, who took us on a tour of the Ed Ruscha exhibition. There we stood in front of a three-foot canvas as Director Nairne gallantly imbued the conceptual piece with meaning: 'His earlier works used words on canvas, but as you can see here, he has written words and then painted over them.' Or, peering into glass cases, we heard the Director say, 'These are some photograph albums of car parks and petrol stands along Route 66 between Oklahoma City and Los Angeles.' As we left MOMA, Mr. Han turned to me and said, 'far too subjective to be of any use.' I was tempted to agree, but lest you be misled, I should add that, as we were shown about the gallery, Mr. Han filled his notebook with detailed sketches of Ruscha's pieces. Subjectivity must have some role in art, even in socialist realism, mustn't it?

The modern world left behind, we were off to the Ashmolean. Professor J.W. Allan met us in the foyer of this mother of museums and spent the better part of an hour showing us various galleries. Even then, we were able to tour only part of the collection: the bullet-proof hat of the presiding judge at the trial of Charles I drew a great deal of interest, as did the archaeology of Jericho. We paused to note Neolithic hand-axes from Ireland and possible comparisons with finds from the Korean peninsula. Western religious painting was admired for its technique in the adoration of certain central figures, not too dissimilar in basic intent to some of the paintings of Kim Il Sung shown us the previous Saturday by Mr. Han. As we ended up looking over the new Chinese gallery, Professor Allan swept his arm about the chamber and said that North Korean scrolls and paintings could be displayed here. Mr. Han appeared intrigued, and I interjected that even North Korean modern art would be of interest; he turned and said to me in an aside, 'it wouldn't be appropriate.' I suspect that he actually meant, 'most of our modern art takes Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as the subject, and we know you don't share our sentiments regarding our leaders, so let's leave this thorny problem aside, shall we?'

Professor Allan placed us in the capable hands of Mr. M. Norman, who took us behind-the-scenes to his conservation laboratory and other archival chambers. The visitors were curious about various technical points: humidity control, chemical applications, digitisation of images, and even broached questions about the recruitment of personnel: their education, age, and job descriptions. After all, they had toured the conservation departments of the British Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge for the same purpose. More to the point, they are the responsible officials for the North Korean application to UNESCO to have Koguryo tomb murals, with their abundant 1500-year old genre scenes, designated a World Heritage Site. Our visitors lost no opportunity to acquire potentially helpful knowledge, being keenly interested in matters of preservation from the start. Just as we were leaving, Director C.P.H. Brown, busy in a meeting until then, came running breathlessly out the main door and caught us on the front steps to offer his greetings. Commiseration was shared over the ravages to one's time by the duties of administration.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Han gave a slide lecture on the Koguryo murals to a packed room in the Oriental Institute. The usual adverts had been distributed, but in particular, I had put it about that no one was to raise any political questions,

since this initial visit was to promote cultural preservation. The slides and the commentary were detailed, well received, and the predominantly Korean audience (students and researchers from South Korea) quite charmed by our visitors.

That evening, we shared a Chinese dinner in town with Mr. Younghae Chi, the University Instructor in Korean, his wife, and various students of Korean Studies. As the wine flowed, so did the conversation. We introduced ourselves around the table, teased the young Mr. Kang about his marriage prospects, and shared hours of genial conversation. At some point in the evening, Mr. Han, to my left, leaned over and asked if I understood Ed Ruscha's work. Ms. Grace Koh, to my right, overheard him and interjected that much of contemporary conceptual art in the West contains philosophical approaches not always apparent to the viewer. Mr. Han nodded and said, 'you have very different philosophies from us, and I simply can't understand those paintings.' I was pleased that, hours later, one of our visitors was still pondering Ed Ruscha.

The next day, we gave them a Korean breakfast in my flat at Wolfson, thanks to Mr. H.R. Kang, one of my students, who is quite adept at Korean culinary arts. Around the table, the hot, pickled cabbage (kimch'i) and soybean paste soup were greeted with sparkling eyes, since English food usually contains about 10% of the spices found in Korean food and a significantly higher percentage of animal fat. After a bit of touring in town, which included Mr. Kang's purchase of numerous books for his friends and replacement of a dog-eared little English dictionary probably older than he—purchasing Western books in Pyongyang is a bit difficult—the visitors came back to Wolfson for drinks and a luncheon. Over wine, Sir Gareth Roberts, President of Wolfson, asked Mr. Han what impressions he had acquired of Britain. The response was simple: 'London has its own character; Cambridge has beautiful medieval buildings; and Oxford has a cozy atmosphere with a lively bunch of scholars'. I suspect that they had enjoyed themselves, since later, when the party was boarding the bus for Heathrow, Mr. Han became emotional and said he 'would never forget us'.

Lest we not forget them and their attempt to reach across vast chasms, I contribute these notes to the community memory. Rather than on the plains of Mars, we met in the Academy and briefly shared our mutual love of art, antiquities, and history. Surely we can take comfort in the thought that any society interested in methods of preservation must surely find it hard to contemplate methods of destruction.