

The Arirang Mass Games of North Korea

Rudiger Frank¹

Purpose and focus

Having grown up in East Germany, from early on I have been familiar with all kinds of mass performances, including organized parades, meetings, or so-called mass games or mass gymnastics. All of them involved large numbers of people, often in the thousands or tens of thousands.² The performances were characterized by a high level of synchronism and uniformity. They included music, artistic components, dancing and marching. They brimmed over with symbolism. The 대집단체조와 예술공연 아리랑 (Mass gymnastics and artistic performance Arirang), in the West usually known as Arirang Mass Games (henceforth Arirang) of the DPRK, or North Korea, thus do not strike me as particularly “breathtaking”, which seems to be the typical reaction of most visitors. This does not mean, however, that Arirang is less worth of our attention.

Technically speaking, Arirang is a visual and acoustic artistic and gymnastics performance that takes place in a large stadium. It is said to involve 100,000 participants who either perform on stage or as “pixels” in a large “living” screen, a human canvas on which various images and slogans are shown. I look at Arirang as part of my attempts at understanding the North Korean system through the lens of its own public statements, often referred to as propaganda. I will thus not discuss the aesthetics or explore how the mass games relegate the individual to the role of a tiny piece in large machinery, how they suppress individuality and show that usefulness is only in the group. I will not try to discover parallels to Neo-Confucian ideals of loyalty and filial piety. I also regard the nationalist content of Arirang as obvious and do not present it as a finding. The same is true for the all too apparent similarities with mass gymnastics and propaganda shows under other totalitarian systems including those of Stalin, Hitler or Mao; just take the slogan “triumph of the will” (의지의 승리) in scene 7 of act 2, which is identical with the title of Leni Riefenstahl’s infamous film about the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

While I am aware of all this, my focus will be much more simple and straightforward. I will go through the 2012 Arirang performance piece by piece, presenting a complete version of the storyline and representative visual images. My main intention is to analyze the structure

¹ The author would like to thank a number of reviewers for their insightful comments, criticism and recommendations.

² For an example of the 1987 performance in Leipzig, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcE4oRAo2iA>

of the performance. But where appropriate, I will try to relatively briefly decode the meaning of the involved images, songs and slogans. What is the message the creators of the mass games wanted to send? And more importantly, what is the unintended message they are sending?

It is in the latter where some analytical value of such an otherwise relatively descriptive approach is to be found. More often than not, this comes close to reading tea leaves, but it is worth the effort as we do not have too many alternative ways to get deeper into the minds of the system's current ideologues. Knowing this mindset is crucial, however. North Korea has nuclear weapons; large parts of its population live on the brink of serious malnutrition or famine; and the human rights situation is disastrous. We cannot afford not to use whatever chance we have to learn more about a country that in many regards remains enigmatic, despite the exponential growth of information about it in the past two decades. I do not argue that one single Arirang performance can explain all aspects of North Korean system and its policies. But it provides another piece to this puzzle.

Admittedly, however, very often there simply is no such secret meaning. Taken in isolation, most stories and statements contained in the Arirang performance are fairly clear for anyone who has studied North Korea seriously. Such obviousness is a necessity, as the performance is made primarily for the nationalist education of North Korean citizens. They must be able to understand the message instantly. As Abrahamian (2012) notes very pointedly, Arirang is "the official national narrative bundled into a 90-minute spectacle". It is hardly surprising that the struggle against the Japanese, the division of Korea, the greatness of the leaders and the achievements of socialism are core themes. Some expressions are bizarre in form and contents, at least to the Western eye. All this might be sufficient for another derisive and sensational TV report, but it is not enough to justify the time a scholar invests to write such a paper.

So why look at the whole Arirang performance then, and why writing about it at all? The reason why I do not focus on a few highlights is that I regard Arirang as a complex work that should be seen in its entirety. Take, for example, the fact that the death of Kim Jong-il is covered in chapter 2, while his birth comes later in chapter 3, or the frequency and the context of references to Kim Jong-un throughout the various acts of the whole performance. I do not write about Arirang in all its grotesqueness because I want to ridicule North Korea; I do so because I want to improve our knowledge about it. My premise is that sometimes we best learn about North Korea by comparing it with earlier versions of itself. This technique can be applied to New Year Editorials or Messages; to budget reports during the annual parliamentary session; or to any other regular and standardized expression of the regime's position. But to achieve the best possible results through comparative analysis, we need a benchmark.

The main purpose of this paper is thus rather humble: to provide such a point of reference for comparatively analyzing Arirang performances. In this sense, I intend to do basic research which is in large part descriptive, but will hopefully lay the foundation for analytical research. Based on this article, other scholars will be able to look back at the 2005 performance or the current 2013 version and discover and discuss the variations that have emerged. I suggest an analytical framework for doing so at the end in my conclusion.

My safe and comfortable position as a tenured professor in Austria grants me the luxury of returning to the principle that form should follow function, and not vice versa. Too many excellent publications by young scholars in our field end up never being read widely enough because the writers were forced to think strategically in terms of building their academic CVs. I am thus grateful to the editors of *The Asia Pacific Journal*, formerly known as *Japan Focus*, not only for their thorough reviewing and editing of this article, but also for the opportunity to publish fast, to include a whopping 132 images, and to reach thousands of readers from academia and beyond – impossible in a traditional printed journal, however highly it might be ranked in the SSCI or whatever index a bureaucracy with a fixation on numbers considers relevant.

Sources

Although Arirang is mentioned occasionally in books on North Korea, specialized literature on these mass games in Western languages is surprisingly scarce. Perhaps closest to what I intend to do is a very nice piece by Scott Fisher (2002) about a visit to the first Arirang performance. Many scholarly studies have been written by musicologists such as Burnett (2013, highly recommendable) and Jin (2012) and thus focus primarily on the musical aspects. The same is true for a larger, but still rather small, number of publications in Korean such as Pak Yŏng-chŏng (2007) and Hwang Kyŏng-suk (2008). Merkel (2013) approaches the topic as a sports event and attempts to analyze it comparatively, but his study stops short of going into the details systematically and suffers from a number of errors and half-truths. Not to be forgotten is the remarkable documentary “A state of mind” by Nick Bonner’s VeryMuchSo Production and Koryo Tours in 2003, which provides rare insights into the lives of the performers. An outstanding analysis of the familial relational dynamics of Arirang from the perspective of religious studies is Jung (2013) who calls it “the paradigmatic worship ceremony or High Mass of Jucheism” and argues that “the Festival is North Korea at its highest moment.” (Jung 2013: 96). Among the visual sources Jung lists are three films made in North Korea: “Days of the creation of Arirang” (2002), “Mass gymnastics and artistic performance Arirang” (2005), and “On the green silk” (2007).

I would argue that given the nature of the event and the attention the regime has received, we observe a relative scarcity of publications in particular in Western languages. One reason might be access to North Korea. Albeit by no means impossible, it is severely regulated and restricted. It is more energy consuming than most other journeys to a foreign country, and it is quite expensive. North Korea thus is one of the few countries where, despite the growing number of visitors in the past years, physical presence or fieldwork are still regarded as something rather exclusive. I was fortunate enough to have access numerous times since 1991 and attended Arirang four times so far - in 2005, 2010, 2012 and 2013.

Another problem is the necessary knowledge of context. In particular South Korean scholars used to face enormous legal difficulties when they tried to learn more about what Brian Myers (2010) in his energetic and challenging book calls “the text”, that is, the propagandistic story told by the North Korean state to its people. With the exception of the presidencies of progressives such as Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun (1998-2008), an intense and long-term research into the world of thought of North Korea has often exposed

researchers to suspicions about their political convictions. In the worst case, it was seen and treated as a violation of the National Security Law.

For this study, I use the video-recording I made in the evening of September 12, 2012. The ticket for a first class seat cost me 150 EUR, a ridiculously high special price for foreigners especially if you consider that a North Korean tablet computer sells for just 30 Euros more (see Frank 2013 for a review). But the ticket price was actually a bargain considering the other costs involved including time, plane tickets and hotel bills.

I focus on my 2012 recording because it is one of the most recent performances I have attended, and because it is one of the two complete recordings at my disposal. The official DVDs I found in North Korean bookstores are merely 20 minute summaries of what the editors regard as the highlights. Burnett (2013) bases her study on Arirang 2005 published on DVD by Korea Central Television. Most full-time Arirang recordings found on platforms such as YouTube come from official North Korean TV. It is hard to find complete recordings of Arirang that show the main screen (card section) continuously. Most versions I encountered have been edited. Their focus switches back and forth between long shots and close ups and between the main screen and the foreground, so that not all relevant changes are visible.

The last Arirang performance I have personally attended was in September 2013. I am thus aware that the 2012 version has been modified. It is almost certain that we will see another variation in 2014 and later. Having attended Arirang before (2005 and 2010), I know that the 2012 version itself has been the result of a continuous adjustment process. Occasionally, I will point at differences that I have identified. This is not done systematically here, since my intention is to present Arirang 2012 as it is. Readers should thus be aware that there are many changes that are unmentioned in this article.

Origins and parallels

Burnett (2013) has discussed the roots of North Korea's mass gymnastics very convincingly. I have little to add and thus chose to quote her extensively. She traces the origins of mass gymnastics back to Europe during the Industrial Revolution and in particular the ideas of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn at the beginning of the 19th century. Jahn was known as the "Turnvater" (father of gymnastics) in Germany and is the subject of controversy for his nationalist and xenophobic views. Not coincidentally, he was particularly popular during the Nazi rule and in East Germany, my home country.

"By the 1930s, mass gymnastics had become a fixture in totalitarian regimes of both the right and the left. A display of masses of young, strong, and agile bodies moving in perfect synchronization could project an image of absolute power and control that proved attractive to many an authoritarian leader." (Burnett 2013: 8). Accordingly, "...the overall concept is not native to North Korea. Kim Il- Sung is said to have organized the first Mass Games in 1946 based on Stalinist displays of similar type, which in turn traced their roots to the mass rallies of totalitarian regimes of the late 1930s, and ultimately to the nineteenth- century German Turnverein and Czech Sokol movements" (Burnett 2013: 5).

The USA has its own tradition of what is called “card stunts” there, popular during sports such as Football games events but not without patriotism and political messages.



The original caption reads: “Kivett Productions amazed crowds with the USAA Tribute Vikings Card Stunt on November 11, 2012. Vikings fans show their military appreciation during the “Salute to Service” card stunt, presented by USAA”, <http://www.cardstunts.com/usaa-tribute-vikings-card-stunt/>

There are certainly many more parallels, including China. I will skip these but find it impossible to resist at least pointing at similar performances in South Korea. The two images below show card stunts and mass gymnastics during the Park Chung-hee era in the 1970s, and a scene from the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The latter is very similar to an Arirang scene from Act 4 (Arirang of unification).



Sources: Left: Baek Jong-sik, Card Stunt for Park Chung-hee, 01.10.1973, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Card_Stunt_for_Park_Chung-hee.jpg; Right: Still image from 제24회 88 서울올림픽 개막식 / 24th 88 Seoul Olympic Opening Ceremony, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU7DPbzri2g>

A final thought on the more abstract aspects of mass games is worth quoting before moving on to the case of Arirang and its contents: “It is exactly the abstract character of gymnastics, free of any regional and class characteristic, that [made it] so suitable for bridging class and regional barriers and therefore for modeling the imagined community” (Roubal 2003: 4, quoted in: Burnett 2013: 9).

The setting

Mass gymnastics have been held in North Korea in various forms ever since the country's foundation. Jung (2013) refers to the “A Hundred Battles, A Hundred Victories Korean Worker's Party” performances on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the Party's foundation in 2000 and 2001 a proto-Arirang festival. The actual Arirang performances, named after a popular folk song, were staged for the first time in 2002, then in 2005 and thereafter annually since 2007. They are thus a product of the Kim Jong-il era (1994-2011). Most importantly, they coincide with the post-famine reforms including the July 2002 economic measures (see Frank 2005), and with the improved cooperation with South Korea after the first-ever June 2000 summit and during the “sunshine” period 1998-2008. Arirang has continued under Kim Jong-un, who took power in late 2011 (see Frank 2012).



[The main “living” screen, flanked by two electronic screens. The living screen displays the districts of origin of the schoolchildren (from left to right): *Ryongsŏng*, *Ryŏkp’o*, *Man’gyŏngdae*, *Moranbong*, *Pot’onggang*, *Taedonggang*, *Central*, *Sŏn’gyo*, and *Rangnang*.]

The performances take place in the huge May Day Stadium on *Rŭngna* island in the river *Taedong* that flows through P’yŏngyang. The audience can theoretically fill up to roughly one third of the 150,000 seats. One long side of the stadium is occupied by schoolchildren who operate large flipbooks, approximately 70 centimeters wide and 50 centimeters high. There is one page for each picture of the performance, i.e. roughly 200 pages.



[Schoolchildren from various districts of Pyongyang act as pixels in a living screen]

Each flipbook is essentially a pixel in a large picture, forming a living screen of enormous dimensions: 232 wide and 70 high according to my count. This means that about 16,240 children are involved in forming the screen. The color of the pixels is switched rapidly by opening a particular double-page of the flipbook according to a command displayed on top of the stadium behind the spectators. To provide a clean image, the children often hide behind their flipbook. The pages are marked so they can be found quickly; a rubber band ensures the pages lie flat on the book cover. The screens show either images or text in the form of graphically designed slogans, or a mixed form of both. Most images are static, but some are dynamic or smoothly transition into each other.



[Now you see them... now you don't.]

Above the living screen is an electronic screen, about three meters high and 70 meters wide, occasionally showing some text in Korean. It is used to announce the beginning of another act or section, to provide the title of the song that is currently played, or the latter's lyrics. Above that electronic screen, often there is a large number pointing at a particular anniversary. In 2005, it was the 60th anniversary of the Party foundation and liberation from the Japanese, in 2010 the 65th anniversary, and in 2012 the centenary of Kim Il-sung (in 2013, it showed another 65, this time referring to the foundation of the DPRK in 1948). On

the field in the foreground, dancers and acrobats perform. Steel ropes span the stadium so that acrobats can show their impressive stunts high in the air. Green laser beams produce futuristic images in the dark, and most Arirang shows include a small fireworks display. Throughout the performance, music is played. Occasionally, when the living screen is turned white and images are projected on it, there are some verbal comments. At the beginning, a female singer performs the Korean folk song Arirang. Most of the time, however, verbal messages are transmitted in written form and by reference to popular songs, mostly marches. Music is heard almost continuously, closely matching the displays.

Arirang 2012: Structural overview

As indicated above, I focus on the message and thus largely ignore the aesthetic elements such as dance and artistic performance. I concentrate on the visual images and mention the music only occasionally. Because the creators intend to tell a story, I follow the chronological order of the single displays (when a new image or slogan is shown). To illustrate my observations, I include most of the displays in this paper. During the performance which ran for about 85 minutes I have identified about 130 displays.

The 2012 Arirang consisted of eight parts: an introduction glorifying the leaders, a prologue, five acts (*chang*) of varying duration, and an epilogue. Some acts were further divided into scenes (*kyöng*). By far the longest part was Act 2 (Military First Arirang, 32 minutes), followed by Act 1 (Arirang Nation, 20 minutes) and Act 3 (Arirang of Happiness, 11 minutes). The prologue, the act on friendship with China, and the epilogue each lasted about five minutes, and the shortest act was no. 4 (Unification, two and a half minutes). Table 1 provides a structural overview of the September 12, 2012 Arirang performance.

Table 1: Structural overview of the September 12, 2012 Arirang performance

Part	Duration (minutes:seconds)
Introduction	00:00-01:48 (01:48)
Prologue: Arirang	01:48-05:42 (03:54)
Act 1: Arirang Nation (<i>arirang minjok</i>)	05:43-25:24 (19:41)
<i>Scene 1: Unfortunate country (piuni tŭriun nara)</i>	05:54-11:56
<i>Scene 2: Star of Korea (chosönŭi pyöl)</i>	11:57-15:00
<i>Scene 3: My homeland (nae choguk)</i>	15:01-20:57
<i>Scene 4: Our arms (uriŭi ch'ongdae)</i>	20:58-25:55
Act 2: Military First Arirang (<i>sön'gun arirang</i>)	25:56-57:54 (31:58)
<i>Scene 1: There is no end to yearning (kŭriumŭn kkaŭ'i ömne)</i>	25:56-32:00
<i>Scene 2: Blossom widely (bwaljjak p'iyöra)</i>	32:01-37:44
<i>Scene 3: The creation of a new world (ch'önji kaeböke)</i>	37:45-42:00
<i>Scene 4: My flourishing country (hŭngbanŭn nae nara)</i>	42:01-46:33
<i>Scene 5: 3000 Ri of Vinalon (pinallon samch'ölli)</i>	46:34-50:52
<i>Scene 6: Even higher, even faster (tö nop'i, tö ppalli)</i>	50:53-54:38
<i>Scene 7: Spirit of Arirang nation (arirang minjogŭi kisang)</i>	54:39-57:54

Act 3: Arirang of Happiness (<i>haenghogŭi arirang</i>)	57:55-1:09:13 (11:18)
<i>Scene 1: White snow-covered native house (hŭinnun tŏp'in kohyangjip)</i>	57:55-1:03:25
<i>Scene 2: Our wish, fly high (naraech'ira, uriŭi hŭimang)</i>	1:03:26-1:07:38
<i>Scene 3: Let's glorify our Party (yŏnggwangŭl tŭrja uri tange)</i>	1:07:39-1:09:13
Act 4: Arirang of Unification (<i>t'ongil arirang</i>)	1:09:14-1:11:48 (02:34)
Act 5: Arirang of Friendship (<i>ch'insŏn arirang</i>)	1:11:49-1:17:29 (05:40)
Epilogue: Restoration as powerful and prosperous Arirang (<i>kaŋsŏng puhŭng arirang</i>)	1:17:29-1:23:15 (05:46)
Total:	1:23:00

Introduction

The introduction, as the epilogue, serves to praise the leaders of the country. In 2012, the now top leader Kim Jong-un was mentioned for the first time after taking over following the death of his father in December 2011.

A disclaimer is due regarding translation. The language used in the single displays is rather colorful. I have tried to find the official English terms and used them where available; in the remaining cases I have tried to keep as much of the Korean wording intact as possible, which occasionally leads to a somewhat clumsy translation but preserves the spirit of the original.

After a warm-up came a section before the actual prologue without a specific title. For the first time it included a glorification of Kim Jong-un in his first year as the leader. The main screen reads “Let’s give eternal glory to the dear respected comrade Kim Jong-un”. The white flower is the magnolia, Kim Il-sung’s favorite flower. On top, the text of the song reads “Forever be prosperous” (*yŏngwŏnhi pŏnyŏnghaora*), which is also the title of this song.



The next display reads “Leader and General are the eternal great sun(s) of chuch’e”, referring to the deceased leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Note that their names are not used. Without context, this can become confusing, because “General” (*chang'un*) is also used for Kim Jong-un, as shown right in the next display.

“Long live the outstanding commander General Kim Jong-un!” By sandwiching the reference to the two deceased leaders between words of praise for Kim Jong-un, it is obvious that he is supposed to be seen as forming one entity with his predecessors. The display of the magnolia supports this view. The song “Forever be prosperous” is still played, including the line “shine forever, era of the Worker’s Party”.



Prologue: Arirang

This is the only act where we find a - very short - direct reference to the folk tale from which the Mass Games take their name. There are some parallels to the story of Kim Il-sung; he, too, left home to avenge what had been done to his loved ones (the Koreans) by evil forces, while those left behind yearn for him. “Arirang” actually means “oh, Rirang!”, the words by which a young woman named Sŏngbu calls for her husband Rirang. There are many variations of the story and the song.

The scene gets dark, and the folk song Arirang is played. Images are projected against the white background of the main screen. *Taedongmun*, one of the old gates of P’yŏngyang, and a traditional bell are shown. The bell is struck twice. Then a scene from an old village appears. A female singer performs the song Arirang, and the screen shows the story. This has been interpreted as a reference to the tragic division of Korea, although North Koreans usually display both parts of the country as females.



The singer on her small stage is moved into the background, and on the main screen a rising sun appears, above what looks like the silhouette of Mt. Paektu, the cradle of the North Korean revolution. “Rising sun” is also the meaning of the Chinese characters “*il*” (sun) and “*sŏng*” (emerge), thus forming a rather obvious reference to Kim Il-sŏng (Kim Il-sung), the founder of North Korea.

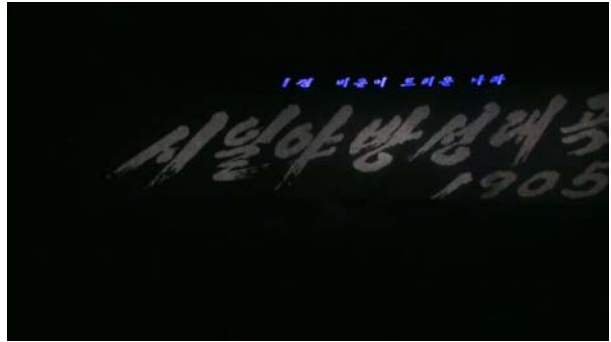
Act 1: Arirang Nation (arirang minjok)

Scene 1: Unfortunate country (*piuni tŭriun nara*)

The title of this scene is the same as that of the first chapter in Kim Il-sung's autobiography "With the century" (*segwa tŏburŏ*). An image is projected on the screen saying "let's wail bitterly and loudly", pointing at the year 1905 when the protectorate treaty was signed and Japan took effective control of Korea before final colonization through the annexation treaty in 1910. The music is dramatic, as in a Western opera, supporting the impression that something horrible is happening.



The people fight, but in vain. Then, suddenly, at a time of their greatest despair, a star rises above a forest: the Star of Korea (*chosŏnnŭi pyŏl*), which is also the title of the song that is now performed by a mixed chorus. It is a direct reference to Kim Il-sung. Before he changed the Chinese characters of his name to "emerging sun", he used "one star". The latter was the same Chinese character pronounced "*sŏng*" (star) in Korean that we still know from electronics giant Samsung ("three stars").



In the foreground, Koreans dressed in traditional white cloth have their hands chained. A female voice performs the "Song of touch-me-not" (*pongsŏnbwa*); this is a deviation from Burnett's observation of the 2005 performance where the song "Tuman river in tears" was played at this point. Chains now also appear on the main screen. Dancers in school uniforms of colonial days emerge. This uniform is worn by Kim Il-sung on one of the famous paintings depicting his departure from his home at the age of 13, when he headed for Manchuria with the promise not to return before he had liberated his country. The music becomes more optimistic and spirited.





Suddenly, a fire emerges, the light changes to red, and the second scene “The Star of Korea” begins.

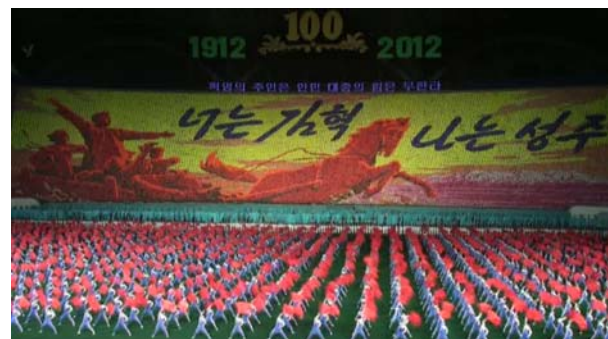
Scene 2: Star of Korea (*chosŏnŭi pyŏl*)

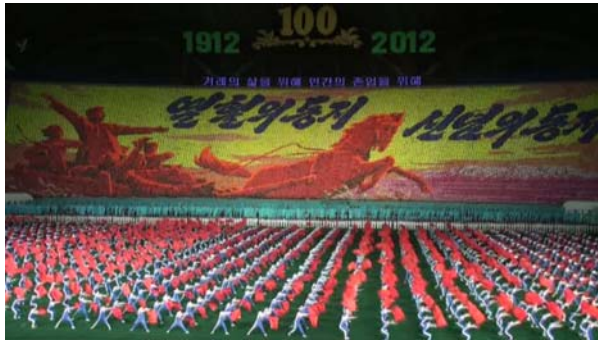
Under the sound of militant music, a red flag with two Korean letters is shown. They have been the secret code for the “Down With Imperialism Union” (*t’ado cbegukjuŭi tongmaeng*), which, according to official historiography, was founded in 1926 by Kim Il-sung at the age of 14. In North Korea, it is seen as the immediate predecessor of the Korean Worker’s Party.



“The first step of comradeship comes from Mt. Paektu” refers to this origin of the Party. In the background, still “The Star of Korea” is played.

A horse carriage symbolizes the masses rushing to join. Letters appear, reading “You are Kim Hyŏk, I am Sŏng-ju”. Sŏng-ju is the original first name of Kim, who, like Lenin, Stalin and others before him adopted a nom de guerre (Il-sŏng) to protect his family from persecution. Kim Hyŏk was a close friend of Kim Il-sŏng in those early days of resistance. He is also the composer of the song “Star of Korea”.





“Comrade of blood, comrade of faith”: Kim Hyök committed suicide when he was arrested so that he could not reveal any secrets about the headquarters of the revolution. He is highly revered in North Korea and buried on the Revolutionary Martyr’s Cemetery near the capital. Kim Hyök is the only individual, except the three leaders, who is mentioned during the whole Arirang performance.

“Comradeship is the foundation of our party”: the legacy of Kim Hyök lives on. Only a few other individuals, who all died early, receive such direct attention aside from the leaders. They include Kim Ch’aek after whom a university is named, and Nam Il who led the negotiations (guided by Kim Il-sung) towards the armistice in the Korean War, which is interpreted as the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War in the DPRK.



“In our ranks: 10 million, with one mind”, referring to the large number of Party members and their devotion to fulfill the orders of the leader single-mindedly. In the foreground, the word “*chuch’e*” is formed. The stadium turns dark again, and scene 3 begins.

Scene 3: My homeland (*nae choguk*)

We see a flourishing landscape that briefly changes into a scene of soldiers around a camp fire in the forest. The song performed by a mixed chorus is Nostalgia (*sahyangga*), composed by Kim Il-sung himself.



“From Man’gyōngdae to Kaesŏnmun, an endlessly long and bloody journey”: The Arch of Triumphant Return (*kaesŏnmun*) seen to the right was built on the occasion of Kim Il-sung’s 70th birthday in 1982. Along with a nearby mosaic mural, it commemorates his departure from his birthplace in 1925 and his triumphant return as the liberator of Korea 20 years later.



In the background is Mt. Paektu, the cradle of the revolution. The scenery evokes a revolutionary site at lake Samjiyŏn and a reference to Kim Jong-suk (Chŏng-suk). The much revered first wife and loyal companion of Kim Il-sung and the mother of his eldest son Kim Jong-il is often displayed in front of birch trees and pink blossoms. Her name is not displayed, but in the foreground three female performers are wearing her customary uniform.



The national flag of the DPRK is shown, and the background music changes to the “Shining country anthem” (*pinnanŭn choguk*). It starts with the words “A history of 5000 years, a shining culture, too...”.

The screen switches from the national flag to the national emblem. The mixed chorus sings the final line of the “Shining country anthem”: “Korea, Korea, may you live forever”.

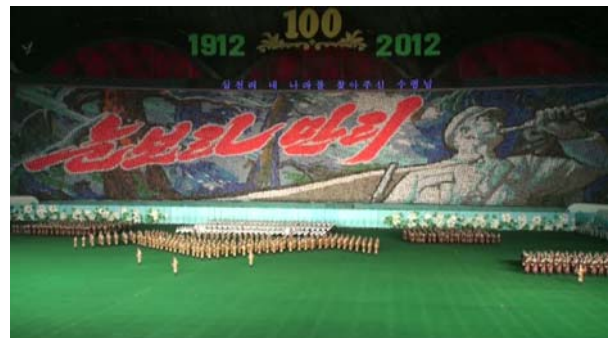


Scene 4: Our arms (uriŭi ch'ongdae)



Scene 4 starts with a display of the two guns that Kim Il-sung had inherited from his father Kim Hyŏng-jik. The two Chinese characters on the left read “*chivŏn*” in Korean, meaning “aim high” or “righteous aspirations”. The calligraphy is that of Kim Hyŏng-jik. According to Kim Il-sung’s autobiography, *chivŏn* is the motto his father advocated, instructing his son to always have grand visions, in particular for the liberation of Korea.

The song “Long live Generalissimo Kim Il-sung” (*kimilsŏng taewŏnsu manmanse*) is played by a brass band. The lyrics of the song appear on the top screen. The main screen shows some of his feats as a fighter: “10,000 Ri in a snowstorm”. 10,000 is a fictional number indicating a long distance, Ri is a unit of distance (about 500m).



“10,000 Ri in bloody battle”. This scene is among the most stunning, since it involves about 200 female performers in army uniforms, plus another 360 in navy uniforms. Their skirts are much shorter than anything that could ever be seen on a North Korean street, and the movements are close to frivolous.

In the 2013 Arirang performance, another scene with shiny orange miniskirts has been added. Such a rather explicit display of the female body stands in stark contrast to an otherwise very conservative and prudish society. Another example is the Moranbong Band (*moranbong aktan*), an all-female pop group created by Kim Jong-un in 2012.



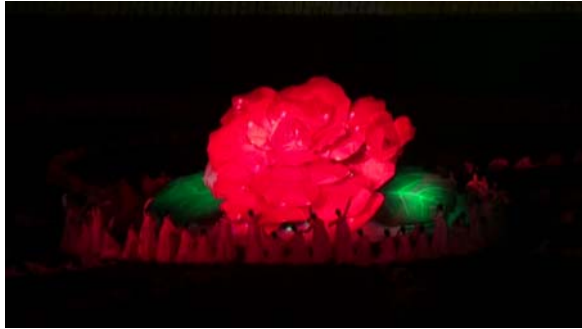
At the climax of music and performance, the dancers form a star, and in the background the images of the two deceased leaders appear. In the years before 2012, the display showed only the image of Kim Il-sung.

The display then switches fast to “Great victory of the Military First policy”. In 2010, there was another display praising Kim Il-sung’s loving care as Generalissimo; this is missing now, probably because the focus has shifted to two leaders. The song that is now played praises Supreme Commander General Kim Jong-il.



Act 2: Military First Arirang (sŏn'gun arirang)

Scene 1: There is no end to yearning (kǔriumŭn kkeūt'i ōmne)



The train symbolizes the last journey of Kim Jong-il who died in the blistering cold while on one of his tireless journeys through the country for the best of his people, not thinking about himself and his health. This was the official version of his death as proclaimed in December 2011. The chorus shouts: “Changgunnim!” (General!). A song calling for the leader to come back is played.



“We will follow with one mind for 10 million years”. The text on top shows the lyrics of a song praising the current leader Kim Jong-un: “Ah, respected comrade Kim Jong-un, who is highly revered by the people”.

The music becomes tender, the scene gets dark. In the center, a large red glittering Kimjongilia emerges. Women in Korean dress surround and adore it. The “Song of adoration” (*hŭmmo*) is played. White winged fairies emerge and move towards the flower; a Christian would perhaps identify them as angels. Then the music gets dramatic. In the background we see a snow-covered landscape. The horn of a train is heard.



“What a great person we have got!”: All these references to Kim Jong-il have been new additions to the 2012 Arirang. They are part of the campaign under Kim Jong-un to elevate the status of his father in order to provide the new ruler with the necessary legitimacy.



It is somewhat striking that the death of Kim Jong-il is shown here, while his birth is covered later in Act 3. I would argue that this is meant to express that his death is a great loss but on the other hand it is irrelevant as he and his legacy live on forever. This is supported by the fact that he was made Eternal Secretary General of the Party and Eternal Chairman of the National Defense Commission in 2012.

Scene 2: Blossom widely (hwaljjak p'iyŏra)



“When born: baby palace”: The next displays show the ideal life in the socialist paradise of North Korea, where everyone is cared for by the state. The paternalistic role of the leader as the father of the people is symbolized.

“When growing up: children’s palace”: There are two such palaces in the capital and many more around the country. Children engage in extracurricular activities there. Western visitors are usually torn between admiration of the high skill levels and feelings of uneasiness over the robot-like performances.



“20,000 delegates to the 66th anniversary of the foundation of the youth organization”. This seemingly odd line makes perfect sense for every North Korean who knows that this anniversary in 1994 was the last one visited by Kim Il-sung before his death. The display shows the sign of the young pioneers with their slogan “always ready” (*hangsang chunbi*) and a delegate’s card.

The children's song played as background must be new. It is about the dream city of Pyongyang, an "airplane of love", and hugging Kim Jong-un "*sŏnsaengnim*", an honorific form meaning "elder" and used to address teachers (the Japanese "*sensei*"). Throughout the country, the signs on schools have in 2012 quickly been changed into "Father Kim Jong-un, we thank you".



"Love of the future generation, love of the future"



The reference to P'yŏngyang as city of dreams is remarkable. In past years, key resources have been directed to the capital. But rather than creating discontent, it built a lofty but realistic goal for those living in the provinces. While East Germans dreamt about Paris or New York, North Koreans outside the capital dream about P'yŏngyang. The regime thus skillfully internalizes the "wanderlust" of a majority of its citizens.



The word "Happiness" (*haengbok*) is written on the yellow balloon. "We are happy" (*urinŭn haengbokhaeyo*) is written over every kindergarten in the country, or alternatively "we have nothing to envy in the world". In red letters to the right we read "King" (*wang*), referring to a saying by Kim Il-sung that in North Korea, children are kings.



“May the new generations of the Korea of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il have a bright future!” This is one of the many instances where the two deceased leaders are molded together.



The motto of the young pioneers in its full version: “Let’s always be ready for our socialist fatherland!”. In East Germany, this would have been “For peace and socialism: be prepared!”, the reply being “always prepared!”. It is remarkable that the DPRK, which otherwise koreanized most ideological imports, still uses the same motto as other socialist countries did.

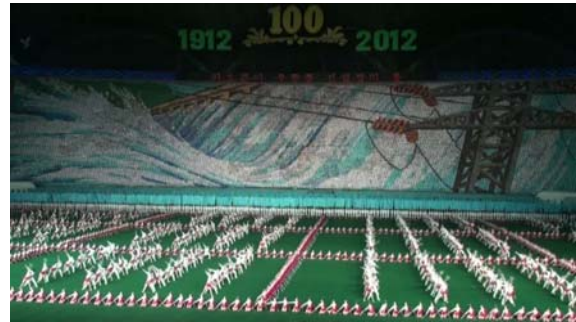
Scene 3: The creation of a new world (ch’ŏnji kaebyŏk)

This scene is dedicated to the miraculous achievements in building a modern society: “Far-reaching plan, tideland reclamation”



“Once Korea decides, we act.”: The display seems to refer to the West Sea barrage at the mouth of the river *Taedong*. This structure is celebrated as a major feat achieved through the sheer willpower of the workers despite foreign skepticism. South Koreans tell similar stories about their shipbuilding industry.

The provision of electric energy is a major economic development task for a country with repeated blackouts. The *Hŭich'ŏn* power plant, a key project in this regard, was finished during the rule of Kim Jong-ŭn after years of construction.



“Let’s take responsibility for 1,000 years, and guarantee for 10,000 years”: when doing something, do it well, and later do not forget to take care of what you have done. Quality and maintenance are indeed a typical problem of classical socialist societies.



The display shows a pipe built from the coastal city of Namp’o to P’yŏngyang. It transports fresh seawater for the newly built dolphinarium on *Rŭngna* island, opened in 2012 as part of Kim Jong-un’s “bread and circus” policies.



The port of *Tanch'ŏn* on the East coast is one of the key economic projects finalized in 2012. It is located near a major mineral deposit and will help North Korea increase its exports of magnetite and iron ore.

“Rŭngna people’s pleasure ground”: one of the newly built amusement parks, just a few steps away from the stadium where the Arirang performance took place.



“Ryugyŏngwŏn [health complex] and ice skating place”. Built on the eastern side of P’yŏngyang across the Golden Lane bowling alley, this is one of the “coolest” locations to be for the children of the affluent and growing middle class.

“Proud Ch’angsŏng”: *Ch’angsŏng* is the name of a county to the North of the province North P’yŏng’an. According to North Korean historiography, it was poor and a bad place to live. This was changed thanks to the guidance of Kim Il-sung, who rebuilt it into a model county, so that its citizens now live proudly.



“Socialist fairy village”

“Forestation and reforestation of the whole country”: This is indeed an important task. With rainfall being irregular and concentrated on the months of July and August, forests are desperately needed as a natural means of flood prevention. However, people chop the smallest branches off trees because of a lack of fuel and firewood for cooking. Many mountains in the more densely populated areas are bare.



“My country which is overflowing with the happiness of the people”

Scene 4: My flourishing country (bŭnghanŭn nae nara)

One would think that the advantages and achievements of socialist Korea have been displayed sufficiently, but there is more to come. A few key coping and perfection measures of the state in the field of agriculture are presented in this section. The scene starts with a green laser show.



The country-wide planting of fruit trees and orchards is one of the new agricultural policies of the recent decade. The idea is to utilize idle spots of land, with the added benefit of reforestation. The state is particularly proud of Taedonggang combined fruit farm near the capital, which is shown here. It has become a standard part of tourist visits. Paddies were converted into a vast orchard, complete with new villages.

Officially, the apples and apple products (dried apples, apple juice, and apple liquor) are made for the citizens of the capital. But perhaps at least some of the production is also exported. Given the country's lack of staple food, the production of cash crops is worth noting.



Pork has been a major source of fat and protein in a country where the diet otherwise includes mostly starchy food (rice, corn, potatoes) and vegetables. In 2013, however, a new campaign was started to reduce the number of “grain-fed” animals. Reportedly, tens of thousands of pigs and chickens were slaughtered. Such news have to be taken with a good grain of salt, but it will be interesting to see whether this display reappears in future Arirang performances.



Kim Jong-il launched the goat breeding movement in August 1996. The introduction of goats preceded the orchards but followed the same logic: these animals are easy to care for and need little extra feed. As with most such campaigns, there is a downside. Goats tend to eat whatever they find, thus aggravating the problem of deforestation and subsequently of flooding.



The provision of fresh fish to the citizens of the capital was among the very first publicized actions of Kim Jong-un right after his father's death in December 2011.

Rabbits have been promoted in North Korea as another solution to the food problem. A story about a German breeder of giant rabbits achieved some prominence in the media in 2007. He sent 12 prize-winning rabbits for breeding but discontinued delivery to North Korea because he suspected his bunnies had been eaten.



Eggs are an important source of protein, although NGOs such as the World Food Program report that many North Koreans have only very limited access. In light of the above-mentioned new campaign against grain-fed animals, this is not going to get better.



Soybeans were planted upon instruction by the leader as a source of protein. This was part of a five-point program for the improvement of agriculture issued by Kim Jong-il after the famine in 1995-1997.



This display explains “circular agriculture” according to an instruction by the leader: Animals produce fertilizer, fertilizer helps growing plants, plants feed the animals etc.



The “seed revolution”, also based on an instruction by the leader, promotes the use of high yielding seeds.



“If the leader and the General [Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il] could see this, how happy they would be”. The reference to Kim Jong-il has been added for this performance.

Scene 5: 3000 Ri of Vinalon (pinallon samch’ölli)

“Vinalon wool”: Scene 5 is dedicated to successes achieved in light industry, with a focus on the domestically developed synthetic fiber Vinalon, which has been produced since 1961 in Hamhŭng and reduced the country’s dependency on imports. Three female singers perform “The silk weaving girl of Yŏngbyŏn” (*Yŏngbyŏnnŭi pidanch’ŏnyŏ*).



The next display emphasizes that Vinalon, the national fiber, is also a symbol of self-reliance and import substitution: “Transforming Light Industry according to the principles of *chuch’e* and domestic production”.

Vinalon is said to be durable but also stiff and uncomfortable. Its development enabled North Korea to produce enough fabric for clothes. With the development of markets, clothes imported through China have become increasingly popular, reducing the relevance of Vinalon.



“3,000 Ri of Vinalon” (*pinallon samch’ŏlli*) is also the title of the song played during this scene. 3,000 Ri is a circumscription of (unified) Korea, referring to the distance from north to south. By using the term “*samch’ŏlli*”, implicitly the whole peninsula is included.

Scene 6: Even higher, even faster (tō nop’i, tō ppalli)



“21st century, breakthrough, cutting edge”: Like many socialist countries, North Korea emphasizes technological development as a way to overcome inefficiency and to increase production. In particular CNC (computerized numerical control) machine tools are promoted as “The pride of machine building in the Military First era”. What can almost be called an obsession with CNC as a kind of “wonderweapon”³ to finally make the economy work properly is something that North Korea has in common with East Germany in the 1980s.

³ A German would inevitably think of „Wunderwaffe”; see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wunderwaffe>

“Modernization and informationalization of the national economy”: The song for this scene is “Even higher, even faster” (*tõ nop’i, tõ ppalli*).



“Towards an intellectually great country: Biotech, nanotech, infotech”. It should be noted that these are not just empty words. Among the results of related efforts are a 7 inch tablet computer *Samjiyŏn* (see Frank 2013) and remarkable programming skills of North Korean engineers, some of which are allegedly used in cyber warfare against South Korea.

“CNC, power of chuch’e-oriented industry”: Note the rocket to the left and the satellite and satellite dish to the right. The performance took place after the failed rocket launch of April 13, 2012, but before the successful launch on December 12 of that year.



“Flame of Hamnam”, “Revolutionary army spirit”, “Reliance on our own power”; “Absolute obedience” The “Flame of Hamnam” is a typical mass campaign initiated during a guidance visit by Kim Jong-il in the Province of South Hamgyŏng (aka Hamnam). The campaign was first mentioned in the Party newspaper in October 2011.

“Fertilizer waterfall”: Different types of fertilizer are shown. The very energy-intensive production of fertilizer is a crucial bottleneck for North Korea’s agriculture. As the depleted soil is used intensively, massive inputs of fertilizer are a necessity. In recent years, the use of biological fertilizer has been promoted strongly.



“Kim Jong-il patriotism”: My impression in 2012 was that being a true patriot was one of the central attributes associated with Kim Jong-il after his death. Newly made slogans across the capital and the country extolled this characteristic of Kim Jong-un’s father.



“Putting one’s feet on one’s own territory, turn one’s eyes towards the world”: This slogan captures the essence of *chuch’e* much better than simplistic allegations of autarky. It says that as long as it is to the benefit of the nation, learning from the outside world is ok. This does not signal an immediate opening of North Korea, but could serve as a foundation thereof. Kim Jong-il is reported to have used that phrase during a visit to Kim Il-sung University in April 2010.



“The hot wind of patriotism”

“Independent strong country, prosperous forever”: The previously used term “strong and prosperous great country” (*kangsŏng taeguk*) was conspicuously absent during the 2012 Arirang performance. This is noteworthy as *kangsŏng taeguk* was ubiquitous in the years before. It was seen as a promise of a marked improvement of living conditions by 2012.

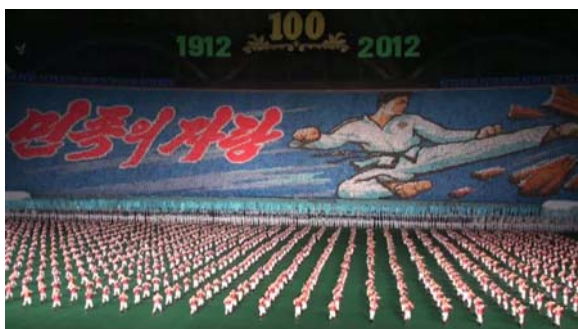


Scene 7: Spirit of Arirang nation (*arirang minjogŭi kisang*)



The ancient fortifications of P’yŏngyang are projected onto the main screen, including the South Gate (*nammun*). This symbolizes the traditional will and capacity to defend against any invader. Scene 7 is mainly dedicated to the display of T’aekwŏndo skills, emphasizing the ancient tradition of defending against invaders.

“Wisdom of the nation”: The performers wear costumes reminiscent of Koguryŏ uniforms, but the lyrics of the song displayed on top are explicit about defending every hill against the enemy American imperialists (*wŏnssu mije*).

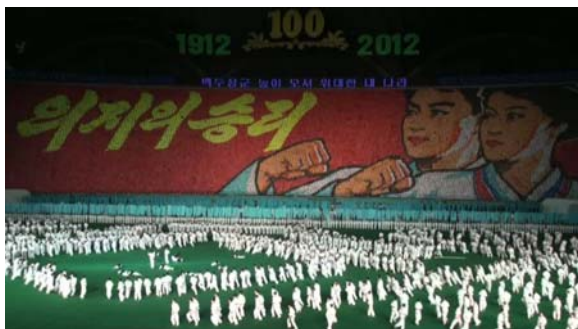
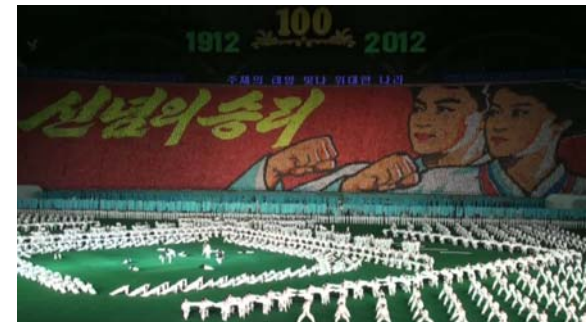


“Pride of the nation”: T’aekwŏndo has long been treated as a military secret in North Korea, since it is part of the routine military training in particular of the large special units. A number of special movements have been developed in North Korea, with names such as unification (*t’ongil*) or *chuch’e*.

“The thunder of Chŏngilbong”: Chŏngilbong (Jong-il Peak) near Mt. Paektu is the holy place where, according to North Korea’s official historiography, Kim Jong-il was born in a log cabin in a secret camp on February 16, 1942. Western scholars insist that he was actually born in 1941 in Khabarovsk, Russia, where he and his brother grew up with Russian nicknames (Yura and Shura).



“Triumph of faith”: The song played to this scene is “Great country” (*widaeban nara*). The lyrics displayed on top say that this great country is wide and large, that the great sun of *chuch’e* shines on it, and that this great country reveres the General of Mt. Paektu.



“Triumph of the will”: One hopes that the creators were simply not aware of the fact that this is identical with the title of Leni Riefenstahl’s infamous film about the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

Photo: <http://www.werna.fr/thekingsspeech.php>

“Let’s show the dignity of the nation all around the world”: The national flag is raised, and the “Song of General Kim Il-sung” is played.



Act 3: Arirang of Happiness (haengbogŭi arirang)

Scene 1: White snow-covered native house (hŭinnun tŏp'in kobyangjip)



This scene is devoted to Kim Jong-il. It was part of the 2010 performance I attended and is thus not a recent addition.

The music starts tenderly, and snow-covered *Chŏngilbong* (Jong-il Peak, see above) is revealed. The name *Chŏngilbong* is engraved in big red letters into the rock of this peak.

The wind blows, the music gets dramatic. While spring belongs to Kim Il-sung, the winter clearly is the domain of Kim Jong-il. He was born amidst harsh conditions, and this is how he died.

Fairies and female guerillas with white fur caps dance in the foreground. The song “White snow covered native house” (*hŭinnun tŏp'in kobyangjip*) is played, reminding me remotely of the popular Soviet song “*podmoskovnye vechera*” (Moscow nights).





The official birthplace of Kim Jong-il emerges, covered in warm light in the midst of the blistering cold. Some analysts have called Kim Il-sung's home at Mangyŏngdae the "North Korean Bethlehem", but I would say this house comes much closer to such a description.

As noted above, Kim Jong-il's birth is shown after his death (act 2, scene 1). Kim Jong-il may have left this world, but he is with the Korean people forever.

Scene 2: Our wish, fly high (naraech'ira, uriŭi hŭimang)

Such optimism finds its continuation in scene 2, which seems to have been similar to Act 3 (Arirang rainbow) in the 2005 performance. The scene consists of a high-wire acrobatic show including a number of spectacular, death-defying drops into a large safety net. No displays are shown on the main screen. The background music switches from a waltz to marches.

Scene 3: Let's glorify our Party (yŏnggwangŭl tŭrja uri tange)

Out of the darkness, the idealized skyline of the capital P'yŏngyang emerges. The chorus performs the song "Let's glorify our Party" (*yŏnggwangŭl tŭrja uri tange*). Obviously, this scene is devoted to the ruling Korean Worker's Party. It was part of the 2010 Arirang version but has been modified in 2012 to include reference to the new leader Kim Jong-un.



"Single-minded unity, invincible military power, industrial revolution in the new century"

“Strong and prosperous socialist country”: After 2012, the year when the gate towards that goal was to be opened, the slogan has lost some of its prominence as mentioned above. Noteworthy is the modification of this term, in particular the addition of the word *sahoejuŭi* (socialist) and the replacement of “taeguk” (Great Power) by “kukka” (country or state).



“Looking up to the respected supreme commander comrade Kim Jong-un”. The three figures to the right symbolize engineers, workers and soldiers. The farmers are missing for no obvious reason.

“10 million become one mind. Comrade, comrade in arms”



“Generation through generation, blessed with the happiness of the great sun”: Great Sun (*t'aeyang*) is, like General (*chang'un*), one of the titles that can be used for all three leaders. This display thus reminds North Koreans of the happiness of a life under the Kim leadership.

“Let’s for ever go one [the same] way”



At the end of the scene, the emblem of the Party is shown, consisting of hammer (workers), brush (intellectuals) and sickle (peasants). Note that “intellectuals” usually refers to technicians.

Act 4: Arirang of Unification (t’ongil arirang)

Act 4 starts with a long monologue by a male speaker, supported by a short film. With a trembling, dramatic voice, he says: “There is a unique divided land under the sky in the world, the separated Arirang nation. After more than half a century of division, a white-headed mother cannot recognize her son anymore. The separated son also cannot recognize his mother, who fed him with her milk. Oh, this land of tragedy!”



“From old times our nation has lived harmoniously, but now this is the land that has been split in two in a flash. Nobody can recognize their fellows. Please answer, you honest heart of the world: until when does our nation, in the midst of a tragedy brought by foreign forces, have to live on a divided land?”. The barbed wire of the North-South border is shown.

But there is hope: “National unification is our Party’s never-changing will”. Note that this is the will of the Party, not of the government or the military. The divided Korea is symbolized by two perfectly similar groups of women in the foreground, pointed at each other like arrows and stretching their arms in unified yearning. Each group is led by a female figure; all are dressed in white.



The gate opens, and ahead lies a bright future. The scene becomes more colorful. The slogan “The gate to unification by the hand of our nation” appears. The women form the Korean peninsula (including Tokdo island) in the foreground, waving the light blue flag of national unification.



The two women in front meet and embrace each other. Then the crowds to the left and right mingle. The light is turned on again, the music grows optimistic and triumphant. On the main screen, the gate to unification opens. In previous performances, this gate used to symbolize the entry to becoming a strong and prosperous country. This double use makes sense if we consider that very often in past conversations with North Koreans, I heard the statement “after unification, life will get better”.



To the tune of the song “*Hana*” (one), this and the following displays read: “One territory, one blood line, one language, one set of customs”. This is one of the standard ways that the North expresses the commonality of all Koreans.

“By our nation itself” (*uri minjok kkiri*) is a core unification principle and the name of one of the DPRK’s websites. It rejects foreign intervention in the matter of Korean unification. It has been included in the North-South Joint Statement of July 4, 1972, as well as in the Joint Declaration of June 15, 2000 (the result of the first-ever summit between the leaders of both Koreas). North Korea traces this principle directly to Kim Il-sung.



The final display of this scene shows the Arch of Unification, or “Memorial for the Three Principles of National Unification”, built in 2001 (shortly after the inter-Korean summit) at the end of Reunification Street and the beginning of Reunification Highway leading from P’yŏngyang to Seoul. Although my North Korean companions deny this, I believe that the figure to the left symbolizes South Korea, as a bronze plate at the bottom shows, as an oppressed people longing for something (unification and freedom from capitalist slavery perhaps) on one side and happy, confident and proud socialist people welcoming them on the other. The chorus sings “one, we are one”, and the scene ends.



Act 5: Arirang of Friendship (ch’insŏn arirang)

This act was introduced in 2008, one year before the year of Korean-Chinese friendship marking the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1949. Abrahamian (2012) suggests that “This chapter... explicitly encourages the audience to see China as both friendly and as a successful model that could be an option for Korea. One party ‘socialism’ is paying dividends in the PRC and the people of the DPRK might reasonably expect something similar in their country.”

I am not sure whether this is really all. The bilateral relationship is not an easy one. China more or less saved the DPRK from defeat in the Korean War, which is not a pleasant memory for the nationalist leadership in P’yŏngyang. Few in the West know that Chinese troops stayed in the country as long as until 1958. In 2012, trade with China amounted to a whopping 88% of North Korean foreign trade (excluding South Korea), which would be

alarming not only for a country that emphasizes independence and *chuch'e*. Information about and from China is a major threat to ideological purity in North Korea, Chinese goods are flooding the markets to the extent that some of them are even named after China (example: “Jilin market” between Sariwŏn and Sinch’ŏn, south of P’yŏngyang), and joint ventures with Chinese companies dominate the emerging business environment.

The bilateral partnership is indeed deep-rooted and firm, but also complicated. This can be seen when looking at this act, and even more so if comparing it with the 2013 Arirang which witnessed a severe reduction in allocated time and friendly gestures towards the big neighbor. On a side note, it is interesting that the playful, childish folkloristic performance in the foreground hardly matches the revolutionary and deeply political messages on the main screen.

“Holding up the Anti-Japanese banner together.” Acknowledgement of the fact that both Koreans and Chinese fought the Japanese before 1945. The main focus is on China’s support during the Korean War, which is commemorated in P’yŏngyang’s Moranbong Park by a monument. A trumpet plays the “International”. The titles on the screen are displayed consecutively in Korean and in Chinese, as are all displays in this act.



“Deep-rooted Korea-Chinese friendship”: The background shows the river Amnok (Yalu), marking the border between the two countries to the Northwest of the DPRK. This is where the cities of Dandong and Sinŭiju face each other, and where the once (2002) failed new economic zone of Wihwado and Hwanggŭmp’yŏng is currently being built.



“Resist US aggression and aid Korea; defend your house, defend your country; comradeship in arms, founded on blood”. These are original slogans used during the Korean War. They emphasize the comradeship in arms emerging from the joint struggle against the US and are a reminder to the Chinese not to forget this legacy. This veiled criticism of the Westernization of China becomes more obvious later.





“The Manchurian snowstorm which our leader went through for 20 years.”: Refers to the departure of Kim Il-sung in 1925 from his native home in Mangyŏngdae to Manchuria, where he engaged in anti-Japanese struggle in close comradeship with Chinese guerillas. The reference to snowstorm is symbolizing the harsh conditions of that fight. 20 years are the time until liberation in 1945, of which the Arch of Triumphant Return in P’yŏngyang reminds today.

“We give the highest respect to the great leader Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and China’s leaders.” It is not entirely clear who “China’s leaders” are, and perhaps this is intentional. In an act of friendship with China, some will find it slightly odd to praise their own leaders. Depending on the viewer’s perspective, the glass is half full or half empty here.



“Korean-Chinese friendship through the centuries.”: The continuous nature of the bilateral relationship is stressed, born out of battle against joint enemies and now transferred into the present. In the 2013 Arirang, exactly the same display has been used - but the word “Chinese” was replaced by “Russian”! This is a stark signal of dissatisfaction with Chinese support of a UNSC resolution condemning North Korea’s behavior in Spring 2013. It marks a return to the 1950s when Kim Il-sung played Beijing and Moscow against each other.



“Congratulations to a powerful and prosperous socialist China.” Note the emphasis on “socialist”. The song played to this scene is a Chinese song (“Communism will surely come”) and supports this message: China’s economic success is not a departure from socialism, but rather a step towards it.



“Scientific outlook on development.” This can be regarded as a reference to one of the three North Korean revolutions (in ideology, culture, and technology). In emphasizing technological development as the main basis for China’s success it downplays the shift toward a market economy.

“Without the Communist Party, there would be no new China.” This was one of the main slogans of the Cultural Revolution in China. The Chinese characters appear next to the PRC flag. Here what sounds like praise is actually a reminder to Chinese friends that the CCP should not forget its roots. This corresponds with a number of similar messages I found in DPRK media.



“Korean-Chinese friendship will flow forever like the blue water of the river Amnok.”: A year later, this act witnessed a major modification. In the 2013 version, not a single Chinese character appeared. The time devoted to China was reduced by half, and extensive reference to friendship with Russia was added.

The act is concluded by green laser beams projecting doves of peace rising into the sky to the sound of the International.

Epilogue: The Arirang of restoration as a powerful and prosperous [country] (*kangsŏng puhŏng arirang*)

This final act shows a bright future and an optimistic outlook. The music is dynamic; the song played has the same title as the act (*kangsŏng puhŏng arirang*).



“The golden tapestry of 3,000 ri Arirang.” “3,000 ri” is a term often used to describe (all of) Korea. It is also the name of one of the car models produced by Peace Motors, a car manufacturing joint venture with the South Korean Unification Church based near Namp’o.

“Independence, peace, friendship.” A big globe is rolled onto the stage, with the whole Korean peninsula painted in red shining in its center. It might be a bit too much to see this as a hidden plan to install Communism in South Korea; red is also traditionally a color of happiness.



The music gets tender and soft, and the screen reads “The cause of the leader lives forever.” In this and the next scenes, the three leaders are once again glorified. The title *suryŏng* evokes Kim Il-sung.

Now the music becomes more triumphant, and the fireworks begin. The screen reads “Eternal Great Sun’s Arirang”. The title “Great Sun” (*t’aeyang*) has been used for all three leaders but in this scene obviously refers to Kim Jong-il.



The spectators rise and applaud in a show of loyalty, while the screen switches to “Towards final victory, forward!” Kim Jong-un is not mentioned directly but this is not necessary. The energetic march played to this scene is “Footsteps” (*palkörüm*), with the lyrics displayed on top in red letters. This song is the most common theme identifying Kim Jong-un in North Korean symbolism, in particular since so far there is no Kimjongunia. However, in 2012 he was presented with a newly bred flower and named it Manbokia. The flower looks very similar to the Kimilsungia (a purple orchid), so that it might eventually become “his” flower.

In the 2013 performance, I noted that the arrangement was more rhythmic to make “Footsteps” even more powerful and resolute. While the lyrics extol “our Great General Kim” (*uri kim taejang*) who “honors the cause of February” (the month of birth of Kim Jong-il), the main screen displays what will remind insiders of the inscription on the Party Foundation Monument: “Long live the Korean Worker’s Party, the organizer and leader of all victories of the Korean people”.





“Be prosperous, Kim Il-sung nation, Kim Jong-il Korea”.

Here we see the current solution to the challenge of legitimating Kim Jong-un, who had been declared leader of the country only after his father’s sudden death in December 2011. Not only had Kim Jong-il never officially announced him as successor, but he had little time to train his son and let the public get used to him. A few months after the song “Footsteps” had indicated that a new leader was in the making, Kim Jong-un received his first official positions in the Party in September 2010. Already a year later his father died. The problem of the latter’s weak independent legitimacy – he had preferred to be seen as the son of Kim Il-sung – is being solved by posthumously elevating his role and, most importantly, by merging Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il into one. Examples include the new name of the ideology (Kimilsungism --> Kimilsung-Kimjongilism) and the addition of the son’s name to existing monuments that now read “The great leader Kim Il-sung and the great leader Kim Jong-il will be with us forever”. Thus Kim Jong-un can benefit from his grandfather’s powerful image and at the same time prove his direct connection to this eternal source of all power in the DPRK.

Conclusion and outlook

As indicated at the beginning of this article, serious research will only start here. The next round of Arirang games has meanwhile been held between July 22 and September 30, 2013. I have only briefly pointed at a few adjustments that I noticed when attending these games on September 21. These include, but are by no means limited to, the Act on friendship, reflecting the worsened status of the bilateral relationship with China and the possible reemergence of the 1950’s policy of playing Beijing and Moscow against each other. A systematic comparison to previous or later versions of Arirang promises to produce many more results.

We should also pay attention to what was NOT there, such as nuclear explosions. The 2002 Arirang performance had included bayonet attacks, but these have long been dropped. Why? Other questions to ask include the way that women are displayed and how this is perceived by North Koreans, but also the reason why women so clearly dominate most parts of Arirang. It will be interesting to see which economic policies are dropped, added or repeatedly shown. The texts of the songs can be analyzed in much greater detail. Arirang can be compared to other forms of North Korean propaganda.

This list could easily be continued. Studying Arirang has the potential to yield results of actual relevance to our understanding of North Korea, its society and its policies, and is also quite suitable for classroom application. To be sure, not all questions can be answered that way. Importantly, knowledge of context is crucial, and the results need to be matched with other evidence to avoid misinterpretation. However, I believe that serious examination of Arirang will repay the effort and hope that I have been able to lay a certain foundation for doing so.

By way of conclusion, I would thus like to suggest an analytical framework for future comparative studies of Arirang. This could be done by identifying a few core themes that either form single Acts or are present throughout Arirang, and then creating a few sub-categories for each of them when appropriate. This would have to be adjusted according to the particular research question, of course. I have drawn up a rough analytical framework below – feel free to adjust. Needless to say that complete papers or even books can be written on any of these topics.

(A) Formal aspects

- (1) Duration (of the whole performance and of single components)
- (2) Structure (of the whole performance and of single acts)
- (3) Music (Which songs have been chosen? Which ones have been dropped? What is the role played by the single songs?)

(B) Contents

- (4) Adoration of the leaders and proof of their legitimacy
 - How are the three leaders Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un presented, respectively? (Form of presentation, number of appearances, context, absolute/relative duration, related messages)
 - Who else (individual) is mentioned explicitly or implicitly?
- (5) Folkloristic elements
 - Which elements are included? How are they used? Are they modified from their original form?
- (6) The historical narrative of the system
 - How is the past (before 1945) presented?
 - Which historical events after 1945 are mentioned, and how?
 - Which quotations from official documents/speeches do we find?
- (7) The Party as an institution of power
 - How frequently is the Party mentioned?
 - In what context is the Party mentioned?
 - What are the key issues the Party is associated with?
 - Which other institutions of power (parliament, cabinet etc.) are explicitly considered?
- (8) Militarism
 - Is the military mentioned as an institution?
 - In what form is militarism included in the performance (martial arts, particular weapons, self defense/attack)?
- (9) Material, social and cultural advantages of living under socialism

- What is shown to be among the key advantages? (e.g. free medical care)
- Which social policies are mentioned?
- Are negative counterexamples provided (e.g. unemployment in capitalism)
- (10) Happiness
 - Is happiness an issue? If so, how is it defined and expressed?
- (11) Technological progress and innovation
 - Which fields of research an innovation are mentioned?
 - Which actual innovations are mentioned?
 - Are any institutions of R&D mentioned?
- (12) Economic development including single projects in industry, infrastructure and agriculture
 - Which economic policies, sectors and projects are mentioned?
- (13) Heroism past and present
 - Is heroism emphasized? If so, how?
 - What options are offered to present time North Koreans to be heroic?
- (14) Ideological aspects
 - Which core elements of the ideology are mentioned (chuch'e, sŏn'gun, etc.)?
 - How do they relate to each other?
 - Which campaigns are mentioned (kangsŏng taeguk, ch'ŏllima, flame of Hamnam, Masik Speed etc.)?
- (15) National division and unification
 - What are the key elements of describing the tragedy of national division?
 - Which causes are presented, and how?
 - Who is made responsible?
 - Where is a solution to come from?
 - How shall hat solution look like?
- (16) Foreign relations
 - Which foreign policies are mentioned?
 - Which other countries are mentioned, and how are they presented?

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About the author:

Rüdiger Frank is Chair and Professor of East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna and Head of its Department of East Asian Studies. He is also an adjunct professor at Korea University and the University of North Korean Studies (Kyungnam University) in Seoul. He holds an M.A. in Korean Studies, Economics and International Relations and a Ph.D. in Economics. In 1991/1992, he spent one semester as a language student at Kim Il-sung University in P'yŏngyang and has been researching North Korea ever since. Visiting positions have included Columbia University New York and Korea University, Seoul. He is Vice President of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe (AKSE) and acting President of the U.S. and Hong Kong-based Asian Politics and History Association (APHA). He is also Deputy Chief Editor of the “European Journal of East Asian Studies” and an Associate at “The Asia Pacific Journal”. He is the founding editor of a new book series at Brill titled “Security and International Relations in East Asia”. His major research fields are socialist transformation in East Asia and Europe (with a focus on North Korea), state-business relations in East Asia, and regional integration in East Asia. His most recent books are: (with S. Burghart, eds., 2010): *Driving Forces of Socialist Transformation: North Korea and the Experience of Europe and East Asia*, Vienna: Praesens, (ed., 2011): *Exploring North Korean Arts*, Nuremberg: Verlag fuer Moderne Kunst, (with Heung Chong Kim and Sung-Hoon Park, eds., 2012): *Korea and East Asia in a Changing Regional and Global Environment*, Seoul: KIEP and (with John Swenson-Wright, eds., 2013): *Korea and East Asia: The Stony Road to Collective Security*, Leiden and Boston: Brill.

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For publications, see <http://univie.academia.edu/RuedigerFrank> Email: ruediger.frank@univie.ac.at