

The Arirang Mass Games of North Korea 朝鮮民主主義人民共和国の アリラン祭

Rüdiger Frank

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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.¹ 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 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 Yǒng-chǒng (2007) and Hwang Kyǒng-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.

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¹ (https://apjjf.org/#_ftnref1) For an example of the 1987 performance in Leipzig, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcE4oRAo2iA>

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