

Brazen American Imperialist Aggressors: Seeing the World from the DPRK

Roland Boer

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'Brazen American imperialist aggressors' – this is perhaps my favourite phrase from my first visit to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It appeared in a video shown at the museum of the Korean War. The video set out an alternative narrative, producing select pieces of evidence to show that the occupying US forces in the south had instigated the Korean War. Of course, each side in a conflict has its own narrative. The catch is that the US version has dominated accounts for the last 60 years, while that of the DPRK has not had the same privilege.

I was with a group of 20 people, all of us visiting the DPRK for the first time. They came from various countries in Europe, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. In fact, one third of the group were Australians. Koryo Tours, based in Beijing, organised the tour, in conjunction with the Korean International Tourism Company based in the DPRK. We had one guide from Koryo and three from the Korean company. More details of that in another story, but I was struck by how many visitors come to the DPRK. Asking further, I was told by one of the guides with whom I had many discussions that more than 10,000 foreigners visit the north every year. Even more, many Koreans from the north travel internationally, mainly for study and business.

Our itinerary was packed from dawn to after dusk, with many sites visited in Pyongyang and then a trip along a bumpy road to Kaesong and the demilitarised zone between north and south. On the way, we often heard variations on my favourite phrase: 'American imperialists'; 'US aggressors'; 'American colonisers'; 'US occupation'. Some of the group became a little weary of the constant reiteration, preferring not to be reminded of the 70,000 US soldiers in the south, let alone the massive amount of military hardware and thousands of nuclear weapons.

But the demilitarised zone itself was a real eye-opener. We were shown the place where the armistice was signed in 1953, the villages and farmers who live in the zone, and then taken to the 38th parallel. Here the feel was quite relaxed, with a smiling soldier telling

us about the current situation and openly flirting with some of the women. We were free to photograph and joke.

Looking out over the temporary border, we saw ten DPRK soldiers standing guard on one side. No foreign soldiers were present. However, on the other side only a couple of South Korean soldiers could be seen. The rest were clearly American soldiers. One soldier photographed us with a powerful lens as we photographed them all. But then, a small tour group from the other side appeared. They were led not by civilians, not by South Koreans, but by yet more swaggering US soldiers. Indeed, there were almost as many American GIs as there were people in the group.

The response in our group was palpable. They were clearly annoyed at the presence of so many American soldiers. Many spoke of the swagger, the arrogance of telling others what to do, the intervention in other countries. It seemed as though they had realised that the brazen imperialist aggressors were indeed present.