

Sections

- News
- Letters
- Pulse
- Sports
- Stripes Accent
- Stripes Travel
- Sunday magazine

Information

- About us /
Contacts
- Archive highlights
- Archive Photo of
the Day
- Classified ads
- Library research
- Links
- Print Shop
- Stripes Lite

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Current Articles
Archives

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Saturday, March 6, 2004

Glamour and the great leader

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes

Pulse, Wednesday, January 14, 2004

It's no wonder the 300 North Korean cheerleaders who came to South Korea during the Taegu University Games put the communist country in a good light for once.

With frozen, eerily smiling faces, the North Korean fembots mechanically rooted for their home communist team, while endlessly fascinating the media and some of the public during their 13-day stay.

It was beauty beyond the Demilitarized Zone, a glimpse at youth that eclipsed the grim talk of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

"I think when people meet with North Koreans especially ... they are interested in what they find in common," said Chun S. Moon, an expert on South Korean public opinion with Seoul's Asia Foundation.

But through media interviews "people realize these people are quite different," Moon said.

Maybe that's because most images from the North are of Kim Jong Il, a short man with huge glasses, a bad perm and poor taste in clothing.

So, did North Korea's cheerleaders prove the Korean adage: handsome men come from the South, beautiful ladies come from the North?

An Aug. 27 survey of 363 South Korean men and women by Duo, a matchmaking company, found that 76.6 percent of respondents thought South Korean women were prettier than North Korean women. North Korean women were noted for their "pure" and "natural" look but panned for sometimes looking homely.

Lee Sae-young, a 23-year-old Seoulite working at a shopping mall, said the North Korean cheerleaders weren't that hot. "They look like people straight from the '60s or '70s," said Lee, who said the girls reminded him of old pictures of his mother long ago.

But here's what scared Lee: the girls' fanatical devotion to their leader, Kim Jong Il — a real turn-off. When asked if they wanted to stay in South Korea longer, many of the girls replied "I would like to go back to our great leader as soon as possible," according to a report in the *Dong-a Ilbo*.

Although reporters shouted questions to them, the girls maintained the party line, chanting "We are one nation with the same race, same language and same blood," and "Let's live in a united country without any dishonor."

It showed that even during what supposedly was an apolitical sporting event, politics were still in the forefront.

Using attractive women to smooth over rifts is common in Asia and "a kind of way Koreans can reach each other and get off the political garbage," said David Garretson, a professor of Asian studies at the University of Maryland.

"I'm sure that's what their instructions were," he said. "You'll have political opportunists whose job it is to be sure they don't say the wrong things. I'm sure that's what the cheerleaders were told."

The women were quick to spout party lines, petite damsels preaching North Korean gospel. They even took down a banner with a picture of Kim Jong Il and former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung shaking hands during their June 2000 summit in Pyongyang.

The reason: it was raining on the Dear Leader.

The headline in the *Korea Herald*, an English paper, read "Fear of Kim's Wetness Stirs Up Controversy." It was reported the women began crying when seeing the banner and forced bus drivers to stop so they could take it down.

"I don't really like that kind of attitude the North Korean cheerleaders had," said Kim Sung-il, a 24-year-old from Seoul. But Kim added the women were prettier than South Korean women and he would marry one if he could.

The ladies nearly never made it here at all.

The North Koreans almost boycotted the games after a North Korean flag and Kim Jong Il's photo were torched Aug. 15 — Korea's Liberation Day — in front of Seoul's City Hall. Only after South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun

apologized for the demonstrations did the North Koreans affirm their participation.

Sadly, the president seemed to be apologizing for having a democratic society, some experts said.

“I think that’s part of the general effort not to offend North Korea as much as possible.” Garretson said.

Although security tightly limited access to the cheerleaders, hints of the North Korean lifestyle came through. One girl remarked they were not allowed to watch television. When asked her impression of the South, another said it was apparent South Korea had too much Western influence that overshadowed its Korean heritage.

The girls’ black, crow-like hair showed no signs of the hair colorings commonly used by South Korean women. Their makeup seemed waxy and simple. Their chiseled smiles and synchronized movements unflinchingly endured.

“The way they behaved — it’s not natural to me,” said Han Kum-jung, a 20-year-old woman from Seoul. While the Northern women were good cheerleaders, Han said she felt little kinship with them and had few good feelings.

Kim Cheol-soo, 35, said the South Korean media made too big of a deal about the cheergirls. South Koreans aren’t that concerned about North Korean women, he said.

But the cheerleaders did look pure, as opposed to Southerners’ thick makeup. Nonetheless, “I don’t like their style,” Kim said. “Women should be stylish.”

— *Choe Song-won contributed to this report.*

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