

Work Will Set You Free: In the DPRK

Ted Lau, Photographer

Yu-Ting Cheng, Contributor

Zahra Amiruddin, Contributor

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Hong Kong photographer Ted Lau visited North Korea in October 2019, satisfying a long-held desire to see the controlled outlier nation. His colorful photo-essay about the “biggest social experiment of its kind on the planet” reveals unusual landscapes and portraits of a proud people with a unique style.

Lau was accompanied by Yu-Ting Cheng, who notes that two “tour guides” oversaw their movement, reviewed the photographs, and sometimes requested the deletion of images if subjects were not looking their best. Cheng’s impression of North Korea is that it seems like a surreal 1950s movie set, reinforced in shots of unpopulated downtown Pyongyang, with its vintage vehicles and crisply dressed residents, many sporting old-fashioned haberdashery (Those fedoras! Those outsized soldier’s caps!).

The trip was timed so that Lau could attend the annual Airang Mass Games, featuring 100,000 synchronized performers. They are captured in vibrant, almost abstract compositions. Other, more subdued images of rural vistas, people tending plants, and streetscapes portray a serene atmosphere. Some photographs contrast a controlled group setting with an unguarded glance toward the camera, like the striking image in an art classroom, and a sidewalk scene where a uniformed guard stares at the lens while two startled bicyclists whiz by in the background.

Zahra Amiruddin’s informed commentary follows the photographic plates, which lets audiences first interpret the photographs by themselves. Whatever preconceptions one may have about this “highly sanitized country,” the scenes are free of the constant sensory assault of commercial advertising; the trade-off is that public spaces are watched over by CCTV, and there are ubiquitous smiling portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il on billboards. Red badges sprout from many North Korean shirts.

For those who will never get the chance to visit North Korea, *Work Will Set You Free* documents life in this enigmatic, original place.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May / June 2021)

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