



A North Korean work brigade on Mount Paektu

Courtesy of Swiss Alpine Museum



Interviewee Kim Jong-won at Masikryong Ski Resort

Courtesy of Swiss Alpine Museum

## ‘Talking about mountains’: Swiss mountaineers visit peaks of North Korea for exhibition

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North Korea is one of the most reclusive countries in the world. Totalitarian dictatorship, human rights abuses, food crises and aggressive military posturing are some of the things that come to mind when people hear “North Korea.” However, a group of researchers at the Swiss Alpine Museum in Bern, a museum dedicated to the nature and culture of the Swiss Alps as well as other mountains around the world, thought differently. As mountains and hills take up a large portion of the territories of both Switzerland and North Korea, they decided to focus on how mountains shape the identity, culture and economy of North Korea.

The museum is currently presenting an exhibition titled “Let’s Talk about Mountains: A Filmic Approach to North Korea,” shedding light on North Korea from a fresh perspective.

Beat Hachler, director of the museum who also organized the exhibition, picked the project as the most laborious and difficult one the museum has ever done, though he said it was worth it.

“Personally, I didn’t really have an idea what North Korea’s topography looks like. In 2014, I saw at the Architecture Biennale in Venice, in the South Korean pavilion, posters with North Korean utopian architecture, embedded in mountainous regions. This was a key experience for me and the moment I started thinking about a mountain approach towards North Korea,” Hachler said in an email interview with The Korea Times.

Over the past 10 years, the Swiss Alpine Museum has had other projects with Afghanistan, Iran and Taiwan, using mountains as an intercultural door opener.

“Mountains are often considered as conveying an apolitical approach. Compared to very political questions like human rights, political freedom, free access in and out of a country and so on, mountains are first of all representatives of nature and culture. But of course, when you speak about mountains and identity, mountains and history, mountains and tourism or mountains and religiosity/ideology you realize quite fast that mountains are a fully integrated part of the political and social system,” Hachler said.

Hachler and film director Gian Suhner wrote a concept proposal on how they would approach the North Korean mountains and presented it to the North Korean Embassy in Bern in 2017.

“Some weeks later we got a phone call from the Cultural Committee in Pyongyang, that



Swiss Alpine Museum Director Beat Hachler



A bus stop in Pyongyang is decorated with an image of the crater lake of Mount Paektu.

Courtesy of Swiss Alpine Museum

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they had accepted our ideas and would support us to realize the exhibition. So, they accepted our tour program. We liked seeing not only several institutions in Pyongyang, but also the mountains Paektu and Geumgang, and the countryside, with its agricultural aspects, in the mountain regions,” he said.

“The most important decision they did was: they allowed us to do interviews with spontaneously chosen people on site, which we did. In the end we had about 40 hours of film material and over 45 interviews, most of them from the North Korean side, but some from Mount Halla on Jeju Island (in South Korea), where we ended our journey.”

The exhibit consists of two forms of film:

one with panoramic views of places and one with interviews of people, presented on smaller screens. The journey is shown via nine different themes, from a Sunday stroll in Moranbong City Park in Pyongyang and visits to the Mansudae Art Factory and a middle school, to Masikryong Ski Resort and a collective farm in Chonsam, as well as the highlights of the mountains of Paektu, Geumgang and Halla.

Hachler noted how ideology influences the perceptions of Mount Paektu, but also that the fundamentals of mountains and hiking remain the same in North Korea.

“The ideology behind Mount Paektu being seen as a crucial part of North Korean history, and especially of the Kim dynasty, is very spe-



A hiking group on Mount Geumgang

Courtesy of Swiss Alpine Museum

cial. But the more individual and emotional aspects involved in experiencing the landscape, waterfalls and fresh air are not really different. North Koreans like nature and feel happy in a beautiful landscape as people do everywhere, maybe in North Korea even more. I guess that opportunities to go and hike in the mountains are rare moments. If people get the opportunity to do this, they appreciate it very much.”

There are also differences between the two major mountains of North Korea — Paektu and Geumgang — Hachler discovered.

“Not only are the climate and vegetation different, but the ideological frames are also different. Paektu is framed today as the Holy Mountain of Revolution and looks like a place of pilgrimage. The people’s statements concerning this place are very near to the official and ideological shaping of the mountain,” he explained.

“On the other hand, on Mount Geumgang, people are much more in a hiking holiday mood. They hike in colorful clothes, practice picnics, sing songs — so we saw quite relaxed moments and could also ask North Koreans questions about the mountains in South Korea, and if they would like to go there. It was easy to speak with the people and they were sometimes also interested in Switzerland and our motivation to do this project.

“Personally I spent time after the film shooting in the North for a two-week holiday in South Korea. I did some hiking tours in Seoraksan (Mount Seorak) National Park and was really perplexed to see an almost identical landscape, very similar to Mount Geumgang.”

Hachler said that the banal aspects of interacting with people who were born in North Korea and live there were the most impressive experience.

“Our media perception of North Korea in Switzerland is very minimal. We see pictures with the leader’s face, marching military troops or launched rockets in the East Sea, but we never see ‘normal’ people. Our project established little dialogues, we met individuals — about 40 out of 25.6 million — and this direct contact showed me that the dialogical approach of the project helps to see North Korea not only as an alien political system, but also as an entity of human beings, living in this particular corner of our planet. It motivates me to think about how we could interact more with countries like North Korea via cultural projects,” he said.

“The most difficult part was realizing how challenging a real dialogue is. Our political, societal and cultural systems are so fundamentally different, that you always realize how red lines exist that you can’t cross. There are a lot of topics that you can’t really speak about, or where you have to accept that the North Korean reality is different from your own. We were never naive. We didn’t think that mountains can make the big existing differences disappear, but they did give us access into the country. I’m sure that any type of dialogue is ultimately the better option than a firewall and the absence of contact.”

The Swiss Alpine Museum hopes to bring the exhibit to South Korea, as it could broaden the scope of the project.

“Our project is very near to the experience of a journey. We went there to look, to ask questions and to listen. Our visitors in the museum can now re-experience what we have seen and heard. In particular, the 32 interviews give you the sensation of meeting people and sharing a dialogue with them. This simple fact is probably interesting for people in South Korea, because they have not had the possibility to travel in the North, and vice versa,” Hachler said.

“Of course, if we are able to show this exhibit in South Korea, it will be necessary to care about the discussions provoked by the images and talks. I guess there will be a huge need to talk about the seen and the unseen in our exhibition. Our film team had a European perspective on Korea. It would be interesting to share this approach within the Korean context.”