

The Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea (Leiden inK.)

The Korean peninsula is a puzzling international policy headache. The Korean War remains unresolved, the confrontation between North and South Korea ongoing. Whenever the tension heats up, tremors are felt throughout the region and beyond. Global powers meddle and interfere, but seem unable to come up with a proper solution. East Asia is a geopolitical vortex with North Korea at its elusive centre.

We at Leiden inK. believe there is more to North Korea than the semblance of a Stalinist freak show, just as there is more to the Korea's than a never-ending succession of revolving crises. And so Leiden inK. proposes to look beyond the conflict and to overcome the anecdotal. We challenge the sterile analytical frameworks that have failed to give us more than North Korean irrationality. The irrationality verdict is nothing but an admission of analytical failure, both a failure of theoretical framing and empirical negligence. North Korean irrationality is nothing but the absence of context and focus.

The Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea is all about context, angles and approaches. Northern Korea embeds the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK – North Korea) in an uncommon spatial, historical and analytical framework. This Initiative seeks new avenues of understanding by questioning and crossing accepted political, historical and theoretical boundaries.

Paraphrasing Geremie Barmé, the Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea calls for a *robust engagement* with Korea and the Koreaphone world in all its complexity, be it local, regional or global. Leiden inK. intends to promote a deeper, more textured understanding of the Korean peninsula and aspires to engage in an open dialogue with scholars and practitioners of different backgrounds and expertise. Dedicated to Korean Studies as a mode of intellectual inquiry, academically grounded in Korean history, culture and literature, both classical and modern, we are open to a rich variety of approaches and disciplines. Our commitment is informed by the academic and human relationships we have with Korea as we engage in intellectual, academic, cultural and personal conversations with Koreans.

frontiers | conversations | numbers

The Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea looks at North Korea. And at the north of Korea. Not just now, but also in the past. The northern part of the peninsula has always been a frontier region par excellence. Many different influences converged there. And there was a lot of fighting. At the same time, trade and commerce flourished and the north has traditionally produced many intellectuals, artists and other prominent people. Now it comprises the territory of the DPRK. It is still a frontier region par excellence, strategically located in between South Korea, China, Russia and Japan. Trade is brisk and the threat of a renewed armed conflict is never far away. Frontier regions offer many chances and opportunities. North Korea is not any different. Leiden inK. looks at these opportunities (economic, strategic, but also humanitarian) and maps them.

The Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea listens and talks to North Korea. The north is not well known. There is much talking about the north and even more screaming at it. Much basic knowledge is lost in translation. The Korean language is the first obstacle. A lack of historical and cultural knowledge makes the contextualization of the North difficult. But our own perceptions also impede. Conversations with meticulous attention for difference and similarity lessens the capacity to be blinded by our own preconceptions. Through representing different kinds of translations (of the spoken word and written text, but also of sounds, artistic expressions and that which was written between the lines) from different points of view, North Korea will show itself in different guises. As a traumatized nation with a very real fear of the US. As an opportunity to invest in. As a failed social experiment. Or as a place where people are surviving by virtue of enormous resilience.

The Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea aspires to engagement with the north through intellectual, cultural, economic and personal conversations by paying meticulous attention to koreaphone expressions in words, images, texts and actions. In this regard it is crucial to take seriously koreaphone notions of giving meaning. The north of Korea is not merely the object of our research, but a specific and historical instance of shared human experiences and humanity.

The Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea counts North Korea. Having access to the right numbers is crucial in avoiding misunderstandings of the north. Like South Korea, North Korea is also defined by the ordinal number 38. The 38th parallel divided the Korean nation in two parts. It still determines what daily life looks like north and south of the border. Other numbers are as simple as revealing. Ninety-nine, for example: North Korea's position in the country list of purchasing power. But there's also the surprising number of 130,119: the number of South Korean visitors to North Korea in 2010. And what should we make of 50,000? This is the number of North Korean laborers who work for the 121 (another significant number) South Korean companies present in Kaesŏng, North Korea. Leiden inK. counts, contextualizes and explains.