
Critical Issues in the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project, Korea

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ABSTRACT: South and North Korea have been politically divided since the Korean War between the Capitalists and the Communists in 1950. After fifty years of separation, travel from South to North Korea was completely prohibited, but later selected some South Korean businessmen and few residents were secretly permitted to visit North Korea through third countries, mainly China. Tourism, because of its peculiar nature, depends much on security and safety at the destination. Likewise, Korea needs to assure concrete security and safety to develop tourism in particular. In new millennium, however, Korea has a major issue to be solved. That is to decrease the political tension between South and North so as to accelerate the reunification of the peninsula. In this context, the Mt. Geumgang tourism project should be placed in the first priority since this will ease the strained political relations between South and North. This paper attempts to review the actual condition of the Mt. Geumgang tourism project and to examine economic, socio-cultural and political impacts.

Key words: Mt. Geumgang, Tourism project, South Korea, SWOT analysis

Introduction

According to Wahab (1997, p. 133), tourism policy 'as an integral part of a nation's overall economic policy must be coordinated with the policies of all other sectors directly or indirectly related to tourism.' In addition, while there may be specific public policies for tourism development, this is not always so and depends to a large extent on the role the government chooses to play in relations with the tourism industry, which is itself partly dependent on the political ideology or philosophy of the government. Richter (1989) discusses how the socialist ideologies of regimes in Asia and Eastern Europe respectively, affected their policies toward tourism development. According to Hall (1994), government usually have two roles in tourism policy making. The first is an active role where a deliberate action is introduced to favour the tourism sector. The second is a passive attitude where actions are undertaken which might have implications for tourism but are not specifically intended to favour or influence tourism development. In support of this argument Cooper et al. (1995) stated that the degree of government involvement in promoting and providing facilities for tourism depends upon the political complexion of the government. For his part,

Elliott (1997) notes that how tourism is managed will depend upon the political culture of the country and the ideology of its government.

The larger role for tourism policy can only be understood conceptually and substantively analysed once the philosophical guidelines and practical interests of tourism are investigated and described in a broad contextual framework (Edell, 1990). To guide the government's own programmes and the actions of private and non-profit organizations, it is essential to give top priority to the establishment of a tourism policy. A statement of tourism policy must provide a set of guidelines for all those directly and indirectly involved in tourism by specifying the broad goals and objectives, priorities, and actions that will provide the basis for the future development of tourism in the destination area. Despite the clear need to establish a tourism policy as a precursor for future tourism planning and development, many government agencies have yet to develop statements of their tourism policies. The development of tourism raises substantial policy issues.

The Korean War and the conflict between South and North Korea have long harmed South Korea's tourism industry. Although the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul were perceived as a means to overcome the poor image of Korea in the international tourism market, the ongoing political instability between South and North Korea has badly affected Korea's tourism industry. As the tension between South and North Korea has reduced recently, however, South Korea is trying to contact North Korea actively under the name of 'Sunshine Policy', which seeks to improve mutual relationships, based on reconciliation and cooperation, while simultaneously assuring a strong national security. Following that course of action such as inter-Korean economic cooperation and aid to North Korea, progress in the reunion of separated families and increasing contacts between separated families will not only help to build confidence in North Korea but is also more likely to bring results. The policy has expanded tourism including the development of the tourism industry in North Korea by a South Korean company such as Hyundai Group and cultural contacts. In consequence, on 18th of November 1998, a cruise tour was launched to Mt. Geumgang in North Korea for the first time since the Korean War. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to give a concise presentation of tourism development and policy in South and North Korea, especially the Mt. Geumgang tourism project. To analyse the effects of the study, secondary data and information provided by the research & research agency, newspaper articles and the Bank of Korea were utilised.

Background of MT. GEUMGANG Tourism Project

Mt. Geumgang, which is along the east coast of the central part of Korea, has an area of 530 square meters. It is 60 kilometers long from north to south and 40 kilometers wide from east to west. Countless peaks which are called 12,000 peaks, strangely-shaped rocks, sharp-cut cliffs, deep valleys, numerous waterfalls, pools and exciting seascape-all blend together into an exquisite harmony. Mt. Geumgang always offers outstanding scenery in all seasons. It is divided topographically into three parts – Outer Geumgang, Inner Geumgang, and Sea Geumgang.

Mt. Geumgang tourism project was finalised on June 22, 1998. When Hyundai Group honorary chairman Ju-Young Chung and his delegation visited North Korea and signed the 'Contract for the Mt. Geumgang Tourism' with the Korean Asian-Pacific Peace Committed (KAPPC), a North Korean Worker's party organisation (Unikorea, 1999). The two sides also agreed on other related issues, including 'Guarantee of the Safety of Tourists' 'Guarantee of Access to Telecommunications during the Trip'. On September 7, 1998, the South Korean government approved the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project as an 'inter-Korean cooperation business'. The cruise ship Geumgang set sail for the historic tourism on November 18, 1998, after two months of preparation. More than 300,000 tourists have visited the Mt. Geumgang in 2000 (Unikorea, 2001). The historic Mt. Geumgang tourism project, which started on Nov. 18 under the agreement between Pyongyang and South Korea's Hyundai Group, has begun to show its full-blown blueprint. The summarised chronological facts about Mt. Geumgang tourism project is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Chronological Facts about Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project

Date	Contents
16 Jun. 98	Ju-Young Chung, the honorary president of Hyundai, visited North Korea.
22 Jun. 98	Contract on Mt. Geumgang tourism project was made between Hyundai and North Korea. Hyundai completed the construction of a terminal at Tonghae port.
20 Sep. 98	The honorary president of Hyundai revisited North Korea to urge the North Korea to comply with original schedule.
27 Oct. 98	Hyundai group publicly announced the master plan of the Mt. Geumgang project.
31 Oct. 98	Hyundai started to sell tickets for Mt. Geumgang.
2 Nov. 98	The cruise ship, Geumgang-ho, launched for Mt. Geumgang on its maiden voyage.
18 Nov. 98	South Korean government approved Mt. Geumgang tourism master plan submitted by Hyundai.
15 Jan. 99	South Korean government approved Asan company Ltd. As an enterprise in full charge of economic cooperative projects including Mt. Geumgang tourism project in North Korea.
25 Feb. 99	The third cruise ship, Pungak-ho, launched.
	Agreements regarding observances facts for Mt. Geumgang Tour and personal safety concluded
14 May. 99	Ministry of Unification announced that Mt. Geumgang tour is reopened from 5 Aug.
30 July.99	Foreigners staying in Korea participated in Mt. Geumgang by a way of showing an example
1 Aug. 99	Hyundai concluded 30 year lease contract for Mt. Geumgang Inn of North Korea
	Measures for tour activation were decided for example, tour by land & tour special district
23 Oct. 99	Government announced a support policy for Mt. Geumgang Tourist Industry
	Sightseeing by land was opened daily
	Inner Mt. Geumgang Tour was opened
15 Oct. 00	Sightseeing by car was started
8 June. 01	
23 Jan. 02	
9 Oct. 03	
1 June 07	
17 Mar. 08	

Source: Ministry of Unification, 2008 <http://www.Unikorea.go.kr>

Tourism Activities of Mt. Geumgang

Tourism to Mt. Geumgang in North Korea, one of the most beautiful mountains in the Korean Peninsula, has been planned for five decades, since the establishment of two disparate regimes on the peninsula in 1948 (Figure 1). The Mt. Geumgang project between North and South Korea is regarded as one of the most significant events in the half a century old division of Korea. Most South Korean tourists travelling to Mt. Geumgang are motivated by longing for kinship and cultural ties, with a few visitors seeking pleasure and recreational activities (Unikorea, 2000). Huge numbers of South Koreans are expected to visit Mt. Geumgang, and more contacts between visitors and Northern brethren should help ease hostility between the two. A total of 1, 734,696 tourists visited Mt. Geumgang from November 1998 to December 2007 (Table 2). Moreover, over 400 South Korean workers are currently staying in North Korea and working together with North Korean laborers on harbor and facilities construction projects (Unikorea, 2008).



Figure 1.

Table 2. Visitors to Mt. Geumgang

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Total	10,543	147,460	213,009	57,879	84,727
Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Total	74,334	268,420	298,247	234,446	345,006
Total 1, 734,696					

Source: Hyundai-asan (2008)

Originally, Hyundai expected 450,000 tourists arrivals in 2003 climbing to 1.3 million by 2006 (Hyundai-Asan Corporation, 2002). These projections appear to be the basis on which estimates for construction of facilities were made. Interest in the project was initially strong and in 1999, 148, 074 visited Mt. Geumgang. As a result of this

demand Hyundai added three cruise boats in early 1999 to bring the number of boats to four. During 2000, interest in the project continued to grow and total visitor numbers grew to 213, 009. However, by January 2001, it became apparent that the original demand forecasts were overly optimistic resulting in heavy financial losses. Along with financial problems experienced in other areas of the Hyundai Conglomerate, the high recurrent losses incurred by the Mt. Geumgang project created a liquidity crisis for the Hyundai group that was only solved by company restructuring and changes to the structure of the Mt. Geumgang tourism project. To stimulate demand, Hyundai-asan Co. reduced tour prices and asked President Dae-Jung Kim's administration to permit a casino and a duty free shop on a floating hotel near Mt. Geumgang but both requests were rejected and demand continued to fall. President Dae-Jung Kim's administration announced a rescue plan. Elements of the plan were: a reduction in the number of cruise boats from four to one; a proposed land route from South Korea to Mt. Geumgang was approved subject to agreement by the North Korea and the Korea National Tourism Organisation (KNTTO) was authorized to become a partner with Hyundai-asan Co., contributing financial support (Kim and Prideaux, 2003). In addition to continuing concerns over personal safety while visiting Mt. Geumgang (Sohn, 2001), the structure of the tourism experience offered by Hyundai at Mt. Geumgang has been criticized by participants on a number of grounds that may, in part, explain why demand has fallen since 2000. Tourist facilities at Mt. Geumgang are limited and even tour guidelines for passengers emphasise a negative message of 'don'ts', earning the Mt. Geumgang tour the reputation of the 'don't tour' (Cho, 2002). It was stopped since 1 January, 2003 due to reduction of appropriation under the condition that the assembly would be concerned about expense support only when North Korea makes progress in the nuclear problem. Mt. Geumgang sightseeing by land was started from 2003 which has activated tourism exchange and contributed to ease of tension in a military way and improvement of cooperation between South and North Korea (Unikorea, 2008).

Facing a continuing fall in demand in 2002, moreover, US Military and the CIA believed that North Korea was using part of the currency received from the Mt. Geumgang project to make military purchases (Korea Times, 2002). At a time when North Korea was appealing for foreign aid to assist in famine relief, but appeared to be spending hard currency generated by Mt. Geumgang on weapons, many South Koreans also expressed concerns that support of the tour was not supporting peace but promoting the North's ability to wage war. Nevertheless, further efforts by the Kim administration to promote the project by restoring inter-Korean cross-border rail and road links and designation Mt. Geumgang as a special international tourism and free economic zone were met (Monthly Chosun, 2002).

Moreover, Hyundai Asan invested environment in Mt. Geumgang tourism business as follows:

- Designation of Mt. Geumgang area as a special economic zone by North Korea would provide the ground for legal protection. North Korea has also agreed to set up a special law within two month with regard to the designation of the Mt. Geumgang area as a special tourism zone. That legislation, which will offer a legal guarantee for the safe

ly of investment assets and tax benefit for South Korean and foreign investment, will level up the attraction of South Korea and foreign investment and promote the Mt. Geumgang area as an international hub for trade, commerce, and culture as well as tourism.

- Opening of land route to Mt. Geumgang will induce a significant number of tourists. Both parties agreed to make effort, such as obtaining the approval from each government, in order to begin construction of the 13.7km roadway linking Kosung in North Korea to Songhyun-ri in South Korea for the inland Mt. Geumgang tourism as soon as possible. The construction, expected to cost between 60 billion and 100 billion won, would be completed within the second half of 2002.
- Hyundai Asan's strategic alliance with KNTA to benefit as it has extensive know-how in the development of tourism business. Thus, Hyundai Asan is gearing up the second stage development plan, based on the projection of tourists via land route by famous consulting firm. Major target facilities would be hotel, golf courses, ski slopes, shopping centre and theme park etc.

In order to attract and accommodate the rising tourists, the Hyundai Group intends to develop the following new facilities (Table 3). If this project is undertaken successfully, this will help the peninsula to achieve peaceful reunification.

Table 3. New Facilities Development

Item	1 st Stage (1998-2000)	2 nd Stage (2001-2005)	3 rd Stage (2006-2030)
Investment amount	US\$ 100 million	US\$ 420 million	US\$ 896 million
Development area	Haekumgang-Onjungri	Haekumgang-Tongchon	Haekumgang-Wonsan
Major Facilities	-Hotel (300 rooms) -Golf course (18 holes) -Comprehensive Convenience facilities	-Hotel(1,150 rooms) -Golf course (36 holes) -Ski resort (7 slopes) -Airport (runway 2.4 km)	-Hotel (7,700 rooms) -Golf course (36 holes) -Theme park -Folk village -Marine museum

Source: Hyundai-asan website

Significance of Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project

The Mt. Geumgang project is regarded as one of the most significant events in half a century old division of Korea and as a tangible result of Sun Shine Policy of the Kim Dae-jung Administration. When he visited North Korea in 1989, Chung-Ju-young, honorary chairman of Hyundai group, proposed the idea of sightseeing at the mountain and reached a basic agreement with North Korea. The agreement, however, was unable to be realised largely due to confrontation between the two Koreas. It was only when President Kim Dae-jung announced the principle of separating politics from economics that Mt. Geumgang project was brought into the light after nine years. President Kim has kept a stance to promote private-level inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation based on market principles irrespective of political relations between government of South and North Korea in the belief that mutual exchange will hatch inter-Korean reconciliation gradually.

The Mt. Geumgang Project will also serve as a good milestone to promote further inter-Korean cooperations. The Hyundai group has reached agreement with North Korea on building an automobile assembly plant and an indoor gymnasium in Pyongyang. Hyundai group will pay \$940 million in the next six years in return for the exclusive rights of tourism and development of the Mt. Geumgang (Uinkorea, 2000). If North Korea uses this money to resolve urgent economic difficulties, the economic burden now shouldered by the international community will be eased.

The South Korean Government hopes that the Mt. Geumgang project turns out to be successful and helps enlarge mutual human, trade exchanges, thus leading to reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. Stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula can contribute to promoting cooperation in Northeast Asia generally. Most of all, the Mt. Geumgang project provides South Koreans with an opportunity to experience the possibility of unification (KNTD, 2000). The Mt. Geumgang project has not only given an opportunity for South Koreans to see the mountain first hand, but also to create a basis for large scale exchanges of people between the two Koreas. Many Koreans hope that the project proves to be a successful, thus gradually expanding the exchanges of both people and goods, and marking an important step towards restoring mutual confidence and enhancing reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. The success of the project can promote stability on the Korean peninsula, luring more foreign capital investment to the peninsula. If the Mt. Geumgang project proves to be successful, a great deal of overhead capital could be invested in the mountain area, and might result in joint-development of nearby Mt. Sorak in the South. Therefore, the Mt. Geumgang project will be a landmark event, the first-ever joint project between the two Koreas in the tourism industry. The project exemplifies the South Korean government's Sunshine Policy and the principle of separating politics from economics. In this sense, this project can contribute to the restoration of mutual confidence and development of common interests between the two Koreas.

SWOT in the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project

Strengths

- Mt. Geumgang, due to its remarkable natural resources, holds great attractiveness.
- The richness of scarce flora and fauna makes ecological tourism possible and prosperous.
- Mt. Geumgang contains great value as an environmentally friendly tourist product since it is being well preserved.
- Since Mt. Geumgang has been highly difficult to access, it can prompt a strong polling effect particularly to those seeking novel tourism.
- Sentimental value to Koreans (Mt. Geumgang is a traditional subject for Korean art) also makes it a strong 'pull' destination.

Weakness

- Due to the poor infrastructure facilities and transportation system, it is still not easy to access.
- Sufficient advertisement and publicity have not been undertaken toward international tourists.
- Overall superstructure and other necessary facilities are lacking.
- The unprofessional tour guides and other service employees make the quality of tourist product worse.
- Poor name recognition outside Korea.
- Image of the North as deceptive and dangerous.

Opportunities

- The project helps relieve the South and North from ongoing tension.
- The project provides people who left their families in North an opportunity to pay a nostalgic visit.
- The gap between the North and South in terms of the level economic conditions can be less severe.
- Highly competitive tourist products by combining Mt. Geumgang with other tourist products in South can be of help to the economy of both South and North.

Threats

- Unexpected situations by North Korea such as keeping South Koreans in custody, can possibly occur.
- The North Korean income from the project can be misused for maintaining military forces.
- The hostile mind toward South Korean tourists can create negative images.
- Poor planning and development of tourism can cause severe damage and irretrievable loss to natural resources.

Hyundai and the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee should realise the issues and make every effort to solve the problems by getting support from the Southern and Northern authorities concerned. In particular the weaknesses and threats described above need to be improved, so as to realise the maximisation of tourism effects and benefits, which lead

to achieve the goal of the Mt. Geumgang tourism project as well. Although the peace process has moved forward, it must be borne in mind that peace is a dependent variable and its foundations are still fragile. For instance, a South Korean tourist to Mt. Geumgang in North Korea was shot and dead by a North Korean soldier of July 11, 2008. It is the biggest misfortune to happen since tours of Mt. Geumgang began in 1998. In particular, the incident was expected to cause a ripple in inter-Korean relations because talks between the governments of South and North Korea have been suspended since the inauguration of President Lee of South Korea.

The Korean Peninsula Future Tourism

North Korea has not accomplished an overall renovation yet, neither has it opened its door wholly to foreign countries. Furthermore, North Korea, sticking to its independent line, has been persisting in the defense of socialism and the idea of independence to delay the time of opening, so in a sense has failed to take the opportunity for development. To other communist nations, human exchanges (tourism, sports, art) have played a role in causing the opening and allowed trust ultimately to grow from experiences, but North Korea anticipates, that human exchanges introduce out capitalistic poison and ideological pollution, and would cause the collapse of the established communist systems by a breakdown of communist regime. Therefore, exchange and cooperation between North and South Korea in the fields of tourism is not still simple, and approaches to cooperation require thorough preparations. Particularly, since tourism exchange and cooperation can strongly impact upon the solidity of system about which North Korea is so concerned, careful approaches of both sides are demanded. Above all things, considering movements of residents of two different political systems, delicate consultation should be established in urgent. In legislating for the tourism exchange and cooperation between South and North Korea, systematic legislation needs to be established on such matters as procedure of visit and limitation of behavioral exposure during sightseeing. Only when the tourism exchange between South and North Korea is thoroughly prepared, can it give prosperity and welfare to both sides simultaneously. Thus, South and North Korea should reciprocally complement systematic, legislative defects and make plans of activating tourism exchange as follows;

First, South and North Korean leaders should re-open communications to actively cope with the recent changes of economic environment in the Korean peninsula. In particular, they must propel tourism culture policies for recovering homogeneity of Korean race in order to dissolve cultural heterogeneity which could occur in promoting the tourism exchange between South and North Korea.

Second, through communication between two sides, they should begin careful discussions to conclude an agreement on such matters as joint-development of tourism areas, sharing of profit after tourism development, development of tourism education programs, should be drawn and reciprocal trust should be established based on the respect for each national system to put them into practice. For example, one possible focus could be on the pattern of tourism in and adjoining the DMZ, raising issues such as whether it

would be visiting friends and relatives, visiting previous home areas, ecotourism, or more general tourist travel, and perhaps also or separately, whether the pattern of Korean tourists would be the same or different from those of foreign tourists visiting Korea after unification. One focus could be an eco-tour package around the area of the DMZ, which has been unpopulated and untouched since the Korea War in 1950, allowing nature to develop in its own way. As North-South relations mature, the mutual development can be foreseen of some of the beautiful, undeveloped areas of North Korea such as DMZ. The ability to link the Trans Siberian Railway through the Korean Peninsula would make Korea the last stop for the central Asian and European traveler and would open a new vista in Korean tourism. The assumption being that tourism is a potential growth area in both South and North Korea. It is necessary to develop DMZ in ways that preserve the ecosystem itself as the proper tour source to meet these demands.

Third, the government also seeks to restore the communication and transportation network between Seoul and Pyongyang aimed at facilitating access to Mt. Geumgang and other scenic places in the North. These recent improvements in North and South Korean relations suggest an investigation of the feasibility of joint North-South tourist products as a first step to reunification, which could yield great benefits to tourism on the Korean Peninsula.

Conclusion

Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project is the first step in the direction of bringing the two Koreas together. Tourism between South and North Korea is at present no longer in “zero tourism” stage by Butler and Mao (1996)’s model. More and more people will spend their time traveling, and tourism is a sector of economy which is unavoidably destined to grow. In the case of North Korea, appropriate exploitation of cultural resources really can help the economy of that country, by creating a lot of opportunities in the field of tourism. It can be said that the recommendations can be further put into practice when political tension between the two Koreas is reduced.

Mt. Geumgang Project can serve as a good milestone to promote further inter-Korean cooperations. The Hyundai group has reached agreement with North Korea on building an automobile assembly plant and an indoor gymnasium in Pyongyang. Likewise, The South Korean Government hopes that the Mt. Geumgang project turns out to be successful and helps enlarge mutual human, trade exchanges, thus leading to reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. Stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula would be definite contribute to promoting cooperation in Northeast Asia generally. Most of all, the Mt. Geumgang project provides South Koreans with an opportunity to experience the possibility of unification (KNTTO, 2000).

The Mt. Geumgang project has not only given an opportunity for South Koreans to see the mountain first hand, but also to create a basis for utter large scale exchanges of people between the two Koreas. Many Koreans hope that the project proves to be successful, thus gradually expanding the exchanges of both people and goods, and marking an important step towards restoring mutual confidence and enhancing

reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. The success of the project can help promote stability on the Korean peninsula, attracting more foreign capital investment to the peninsula. If the Mt. Geumgang project proves to be successful, greater sum of capital could be invested in the mountain area, and might result in joint-development of nearby Mt. Sorak in the South.

Thus, the Mt. Geumgang project represents a landmark event, the first-ever joint project between the two Koreas in the tourism industry. The project exemplifies the South Korean government's Sunshine Policy and the principle of separating politics from economics. In this sense, this project can continually contribute to the restoration of mutual confidence and development of common interests between the two Koreas. Mt. Geumgang tourism cannot be considered valid only because it is a nice idea. A continuance of this business must be discussed in relation to whether it will actually work or not, for it is only this kind of discernment that will be of long term help to improving North-South relations.

Tourism exchange projects by Hyundai including Mt. Geumgang Tour are not for only travel interchange between the South and North but also for making a momentum for unification, so tourism exchange should shift from private enterprise leading to governmental policy whereby North Korea would discard near-sighted prospects for simple acquisition of foreign currency and show some changes of attitude to develop exchanges and communications between South and North in the true sense. Thus, South Korean and North Korean government should be further invested Mt. Geumgang tourism project for peace and reunification. In other words, the major opportunities that can occur in a state of peace.

- Increased volume of tourists
- Air and travel liberalization
- Change of image
- Expansion of business activity
- Employment opportunities

Consequently, since the tourism exchange between South and North Korea could be an important element impacting considerably on the maintenance of each national system, it should be carefully carried out step by step and promoted in ways of combining industrial development with tourism industry and provide help to the future planning and development of Korean peninsula. South Korea government will continue with patience efforts to resume dialogue with North Korea. Furthermore, government should support in order to make our efforts for a better inter-Korean relations and national unification successful, government have to maintain the consistency in South Korea's policy and the policy must be made and implemented based on public consensus and support. Considering the recent developments in international relations and the North Korea's devastated economy, it will be convinced that North Korea's change is inevitable. Our ultimate goal – reunification-will probably have to wait a little longer. Consequently, a peaceful and successful Korean reunification can stand to benefit not only Koreans but also the entire world community.

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