North Korea’s Glorious Leader, Kim Il Sung, celebrated his 80th birthday last month. Eric Aarons recalls his journeys around the various museums and monuments to the Glorious Leader—including The Chair Kim Il Sung Didn’t Sit On.

In September 1980, a close friend and I travelled to Pyongyang to attend the sixth congress of the Korean Workers’ (communist) Party, in response to a long-standing invitation to the Communist Party of Australia to send a delegation. To be truthful, however, our main purpose was to see what was happening in China, which was opening up to the world after its decade-long isolation arising from the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution.

At Beijing we were met by an untypical North Korean who, to us, resembled an Australian ocker city lair. He installed us in the new section of the Beijing Hotel, whose large restaurant was filled with foreign business people. When we were due to leave to catch the plane to Pyongyang, our Korean arrived an hour late, all dishevelled and bustling. There followed a frantic drive to the airport with our chauffeur outdoing even the death-defying Chinese drivers—that is, those who defy pedestrians and cyclists to avoid death.

Pyongyang is a fine city with many beautiful, well-constructed buildings with a pleasing and innovative architecture of both western and eastern styles, and blends of both. Then there was the museum, the museum and the museum…We were conducted through five or six. A number of them are magnificent and huge, with scores of rooms, each containing dozens of exhibits. And every one of them features you know who. Kim Il Sung here, there and everywhere. His binoculars, His toothbrush, His bed, His whatever…He at this battle and that, He launching a ship, addressing a multitude, teaching the peasants, the workers, the intellectuals...

Readers have probably experienced the mind-numbing effects of traipsing around large exhibitions, and in Korea, when you are showing signs of wear they take you to a reception room for reviving cups of tea. Then they produce The Book while you are still in your weakened state and ask you to write something in it. We did, complimenting the Korean people on their great accomplishments. But this wasn’t quite what they wanted. “Wouldn’t you like”, they cajoled, “to write something about our Great and Dearly Beloved leader, Comrade Kim Il Sung?” “Thank you very much, no”, we replied, “we have written what we thought.” We knew that one word of praise for the Great and Dearly Beloved Leader would be widely quoted, tying the visitors and their party into the monstrous cult.

But they are a tough as well as a talented people, and weren’t about to give up without a fight. So they dragged us around to still more exhibits of Him to soften us up.

The last exhibit in the second museum we visited was unusual—it was a large painting of a woman and a teenage boy, with no Kim Il Sung in sight. “Who’s that?” we asked. Our keeper and guide went into quite a huddle, but knowing we would persist with the question, finally decided on their reply: “That is our Great and Dearly Beloved Leader’s constant companion.” “And the boy?” After another huddle: “That is our Dear Leader, Comrade Kim Jong Il (Kim Il Sung’s son and long-designated successor).” “And,” we said, again out of genuine interest, “how many children does Comrade Kim Il Sung have?” Once more a huddle, then this response: “We do not discuss the private life of our Great and Dearly Beloved Leader, Comrade Kim Il Sung.”

We visited a village some distance from the city—a commune or co-operative and, from what we could see, well run, with a laboratory, school, child-minding centre and other services; and a museum…As usual, He doing this, that and the other. I came upon a strange exhibit—an ordinary wooden kitchen chair with a block of concrete beside it.
“Ahh!” I thought to myself, “I’ve got them; the pattern is broken.” “What’s this?” I said innocently pointing to the chair. “That”, said the lovely guide, not missing a beat, “is the chair that our Great and Dearly Beloved Leader Kim Il Sung didn’t sit on.” It was too much; “Ahh come off it” I said, “you’re putting me on!”

Not a bit of it, as the tale was solemnly told; the Great and Dearly Beloved Leader had visited the village to tell the peasants how to grow rice, or whatever it was, and the villagers had prepared carefully for the meeting, bringing out their best chair to accommodate the heavenly bottom. But being the democrat that He was, the Great and Dearly Beloved Leader sat instead on the humble concrete block.

But a delegate from another country with whom we got friendly was a little less circumspect. He genuinely felt that he should respond to the lavish hospitality by making some sympathetic noises about the Great and Dearly Beloved Leader and, as a consequence, became increasingly enmeshed.

On the last day of the congress the leaders of delegations were introduced to He Himself, and had their hands shaken. The interpreters seemed to be really moved at the sight of the right hands of their charges, which had touched something beyond the mortal. Our friend was taken to the dentist for treatment soon after, and the wondrous tale told by his interpreter. Then the dentist had an idea. He produced a bandage and wound it round The Hand so that it would remain uncontaminated.

Later that day our friend was put on television to sing praises of the congress and the Great and Dearly Beloved Leader. When he had finished and the lights were turned off, the interpreter told the story of the bandaged hand, so the lights went on again, and its owner had to recount the tale to the TV crew in a second stint.

When the time came for us to leave, our friend seemed rather glum. “What’s the trouble?” we asked. He had to stay on, go to a mountain retreat after, and the wondrous tale told by...I hope he’s not still there.

These few personal experiences of the cult of Kim Il Sung may convey some feeling of its truly bizarre quality, unmatched even by the cults of Stalin, Mao, or the Japanese emperors. But I would not like to leave it there without making two more serious points.

Firstly, and however the blame for the war is apportioned, when the US and other armies were forced back to the 38th parallel by the Chinese counter-attack, they had orders to systematically demolish every building, bridge and culvert, and this they thoroughly did. For his role in the reconstruction of the country from the ground up, Kim Il Sung earned great support among his people, so the cult, however repellent, was not entirely imposed from the top.

Secondly, the cult, and the rigid social discipline it helped to impose, has not saved the North Korean economy from the same kind of failings which have become evident in every country designated as socialist. The fact that, whatever the nature of the historical origins, traditions and political regimes involved, major problems of essentially the same nature have emerged in all cases should impel socialists towards a more searching scrutiny of their project than has yet been in evidence.

ERIC AARONS is a member of ALR’s editorial collective. His memoirs will be published by Penguin Books.

For New Times’ Sake

It finally happened. Marxism Today, the glossy and controversial British counterpart to ALR and scourge of yuppy-hating socialist traditionalists, has closed. The magazine which probably had more impact on leftwing thought in Britain than any other publication of the 80s, and which was responsible for formulating the dominant critique of Thatcherism, appeared for the last time in December.

It became the intellectual flagship of the soft Left, the broad grouping which wrestled the ideological high ground of the Left from its electorally alienating leadership of the early 80s. But the divide between MT’s supporters and detractors was about more than just matters of electoral realism; it was also a cultural and attitudinal one. Its readership was largely young, educated, moneyed and iconoclastic, not wedded to particular forms of socialist organisation (never mind the labourist and statist programs whose day they saw as having passed), and prepared to slaughter sacred cows in the search for ends rather than means. The paradox is why, when its ideas had finally triumphed and the magazine was still at a creative high tide, it ran out of steam.

Most commentators saw nothing unexpected or strange about the magazine’s closure, since MT was, officially at least, the “Theoretical and Discussion Journal of the Communist Party” (until the October 1991 edition, which carried the tag “Sponsored by the Communist Party”). The party had recently taken the fashionable bolshevik suicide option by voting itself out of existence. Surely this was a good time for a marxist journal to file itself into the waste paper basket of