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Kim's girls quit China as H-bomb boast backfires



The song is over as band members arrive at Beijing airport after an apparent snub led to their concerts being cancelled

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They are the flower of North Korean womanhood: pop superstars, moral exemplars and cultural ambassadors rolled into one. Now the all-girl Moranbong Band are embroiled in a diplomatic row.

The 20-strong group halted a visit to China, hours before concerts which had appeared to represent a warming of relations between Pyongyang and Beijing. According to South Korean media, the tour was stopped after the band, the personal creation of Kim Jong Un, were snubbed by their hosts.

The North Koreans were offended when the Chinese government decided to send lower-ranking officials to the three invitation-only concerts at Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts, starting on Saturday, according to Yonhap, the Seoul news agency.

This, it said, was a deliberate expression of Chinese annoyance at a statement last week by Kim Jong Un, in which he boasted that North Korea had a hydrogen bomb.

“North Korea had initially wanted President Xi or Premier Li to attend the performance, but China did not agree on that,” a Chinese official was quoted as telling Yonhap. “Instead, China offered to send one of its politburo members to the performance.”

When China informed them that it would send a still more lowly delegation, North Korea pulled out its performers and flew them straight home. Moranbong Band was formed in 2012 at Mr Kim’s personal behest. The 20 female musicians, dressed in spangled, low-cut outfits, sing patriotic songs and play guitars, violins and electric keyboards.

At one early concert, they appeared in the guise of Disney characters including Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh and Tigger, and sang a version of Frank Sinatra’s My Way. Hyon Song Wol, the manager of the band, is an ex-girlfriend of Mr Kim himself, according to North Korean defectors.

A commentary on the band on the North Korean state news agency said recently: “Since its birth, the band has creditably played its role as the first standard-bearer on the ideological and cultural front, arousing all the service personnel and people to the building of a thriving nation through its fresh and go-ahead performance activities.”

Since coming to power four years ago, Mr Kim has failed to visit China, the closest thing that North Korea has to an international friend. The dispatch of his band was seen as a tentative effort improving poor relations between the two countries.

On Thursday, Mr Kim boasted that the North was “ready to detonate self-reliant A-bombs and H-bombs to reliably defend its sovereignty.” It was the first time that Pyongyang had claimed to possess powerful hydrogen bombs. The claim, whether true or not, would have annoyed the Chinese, who are pressing the North to get rid of its nuclear arsenal.

The North Koreans may also have been disconcerted by a storm of gossipy commentary on Chinese social media, discussing, among other things, Mr Kim’s alleged romantic history with Ms Hyon.

The first sign that something was wrong came on Saturday afternoon when band members arrived at Beijing’s airport in North Korean embassy vehicles. They left on board a North Korean Air Koryo jet shortly after 4pm after a long delay, according to reports on sina.com, a Chinese news website.

A staff member at the national theatre, where the band was to give the invitation-only performances, said that the concerts had been cancelled, but did not give a reason.

An accompanying North Korean musical troupe, the State Merited Chorus, left with them. Calls to the international department of the Communist party’s central committee, which organises exchanges with foreign political parties, went unanswered yesterday and there was no statement available online.

The closest thing to an official comment on the row was a report on China’s Xinhua news agency, which attributed the cancellation of the concerts to “communication issues at the working level.”