

## Introduction

The central square in Pyongyang (Pyeongyang) buzzes with patriotic commotion as millions of legs are lifted in one unanimous step. The procession of soldiers, workers, farmers, students, and ordinary citizens, all in immaculately organized regiments, turns around the gloomy corners of the gargantuan Stalinist buildings and heads straight toward the sacred center of today's jubilee. Each regiment moves in unison while exuding unflinching zeal for the regime: young students, future soldiers, flaunt slogans like "Let us meet at the war front" and "We will become bullets ourselves"; farmers march around the gigantic moving platform displaying the models of the bountiful harvest for the year; veterans' family members demonstrate with slogans professing their profound love for the leader, such as "We cannot live without you" and "We worship the Dear General like the sky."

The marchers look weary and lean, wearing their best clothes, well adorned for the pompous occasion. Their facial expressions are intense, but their hollow gazes directed at the state leaders on a high podium betray the intensity. As the marchers pass by the sacrosanct leader Kim Jong-il (Gim Jeong-il), they wave their arms more frantically and proclaim even louder than before: "LONG LIVE THE DEAR GENERAL! LONG LIVE THE DEAR GENERAL!" Like the voice of a specter, the echo resonates over the gray city long after the marchers disappear from sight.<sup>1</sup>

It is 2003 and North Korea is commemorating the fifty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of its state. For half a century, the country has gone through vicissitudes from the glorious reconstruction of the war-shattered nation to the recent nuclear and economic crises. As the end of World War



Figure 1. A parade that took place in Pyongyang in 2003, from *The Democratic People's Republic of Korea* 9 (2008), 3.

II brought thirty-six years (1910–45) of Japanese colonial rule over Korea to an end, Koreans hoped to establish a self-governed and united nation-state. But contrary to the desire of the Korean people, the nation was divided along the thirty-eighth parallel in 1945. Against the overwhelmingly nationalistic sentiment of the Korean people, who longed to resuscitate a lost national identity in a unified postcolonial nation, North and South Korea established their own regimes, which still exist as two separate sovereign states.

The current North Korean regime was established in 1948 with the Soviet Union's support of Kim Il-sung (Gim Il-seong) as the head of the state, who was a young guerrilla fighter returning from Manchuria via the Soviet Union. North Korea and the Soviet Union officially established a diplomatic relationship in August 1948, but during the three preceding years, the Soviet Union created a virtual protectorate out of North Korea. As the supporter of Kim Il-sung, the Soviet Union played a crucial role in the formation of the North Korean state in both political and cultural spheres: however, North Korea eventually made attempts to grow out of the shadows of foreign influence by manifesting the ideology of *juche* (self-reliance), the

guiding spirit of North Korea that extols the indigenous Korean ways of life. As North Korea was flaunting an independent spirit that became an essential way of differentiating itself from South Korea, it quickly restored traditional ties with China and played savvy diplomatic games to set off the two big brothers in the socialist bloc. By cleverly maneuvering the Sino-Soviet tension, North Korea was able to attract much-needed financial assistance from both superpowers, which enabled the post-Korean War reconstruction of the nation from ground zero.

The economic boost that followed came to its demise as the socialist bloc disintegrated with the downfall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the open market policy of China, and the subsequent halt of economic aid from traditional allies of the socialist countries. Added to these factors, North Korea's unwillingness to adjust to the rapidly changing world order in the 1990s created a disaster that mounted to unprecedented national crisis, yielding countless casualties of political persecution and economic deprivation. Millions of North Koreans endured monumental suffering during the last decade, as millions starved to death, while many others escaped the country in search of food and a better life. Just a year before the parade in the central square in Pyongyang was staged, the North Korean regime was labeled by the U.S. president as a member of "the axis of evil"—a stultifying political branding that would gain much wider recognition than the "hermit kingdom," formerly used often in reference to the quixotic nation. North Korea's elusive negotiating tactics in attempts to resolve the nuclear crisis in the years since have worsened its national image; it is still perceived as one of the most antagonistic nations in the world.

Amid a series of intense political/economic crises and international conflicts, North Korea has staged an unflinching display of patriotism, the massive scale of which exhausts even those who merely watch. Why is North Korea so obsessed with theatrical presentation of this idealized self-assessment while its political, economic, and sociocultural reality presents a stark contrast? What is the rationale for an economically troubled nation's investing so many resources in daylong propaganda exercises? And finally, do the participants staging such a breathtaking synchronicity actually conform to the state-imposed ideals of the unified North Korean nation?

### The Confucian-Family State

This book emerged from the desire to answer these questions and fill the lacuna in research on North Korean society and culture through the lens of

theater, film, and everyday performance—an ideology-shaping matrix that not only entertains but also essentially organizes and mobilizes society. While considerable political, military, and economic attention has been paid to North Korea in recent years, much less effort has been focused on the culture developed since the Cold War era. The socialist culture of North Korea has had a tremendous influence on daily life and produced the nation's great contradiction: striving to be a part of the global market economy while still claiming socialism as the official state ideology. How are we to understand such dual measures, which allow socialism to linger on, whereas the Soviet Union saw its grand finale more than a decade ago and China is continuing its march toward economic prosperity?

In addressing these issues, the dominant Eurocentric analyses of modernity in Korea, which misrepresent the sources and significance of political revolution in East Asia, should be scrutinized. As Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen have argued, “The nation-state idea—i.e., the assumption that cultural identities (nation) coincide with politically sovereign entities (state) to create a series of internally unified and essentially equal unites”<sup>2</sup> proves to be a myth in the case of North Korea, since the cultural identity of the nation is deeply rooted in Confucian tradition, which Eurocentric discourse on the establishment of the modern state does not necessarily take into account. Consequently, the significance of the socialist revolution in North Korea should be reassessed with bifocal scrutiny: the Soviet Union's patronage was an undeniable factor in establishing the modern state and culture,<sup>3</sup> yet the long-standing Confucian family traditions of East Asia, which prioritize collectivity over individuality, are another reason the socialist revolution, advocating the communal life rather than modern individuality, succeeded.

Confucian ideals value the family as one organic body and the basis of a universal structure; accordingly, Confucianism throughout history postulated an intrinsic relationship between individual and family, and extended that notion to the state and even the universe. As Judith Stacey points out, the family structure provides a frame through which individuals function in society, a view that can be extended to examine the North Korean case.

It is impossible to fully separate discussions of social and family structure for two major reasons. First, in profound ways the economic order that supported the Celestial Empire was a family economy. Second, Confucianism, the “state religion”—a set of social structural principles, ethical precepts, and behavioral norms—was at an exceptionally well-articulated

ideology both for ruling-class hegemony and for family relationships and organization. Thus, traditional China offers an unusual opportunity to perceive the casual contribution a family system—and the principles of sexual and generational relationships that underlie it—can make to the construction of broader arenas of political and economic order.<sup>4</sup>

Similar to China, Korean society also organized social relationships in terms of family structure. As Bruce Cumings points out: “Family rearing principles [in Korea] can be extended to politics, to the state, and to the family-state of ancient kings or of Kim Il-sung (at least in the imaginings of his ideologues). The individual is not an atom, detached from the society, but the building block of the whole, the basis of a society conceived organically.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Charles Armstrong notes that the metaphors of “community and kin” were central to the North Korean representation of the nation.<sup>6</sup>

Such an emphasis on the family unit and values typical of traditional Korea survived political upheavals and social changes and continued to serve the new regime of North Korea. Stacey’s argument that “socialist revolution has had the ironic role of strengthening a reformed version of traditional peasant family life” in rural China, which, in turn, “has strengthened peasant support for the revolution,”<sup>7</sup> offers a useful analogy for examining the case of North Korea. There, an even more forceful patriarchy than that of the People’s Republic of China was instituted to regulate and monitor every aspect of life, engineering a hereditary socialist state unprecedented in history. Charles Armstrong aptly notes how North Korea articulated its postcolonial nationalism in terms of familiar family kinship:

As in all effective nationalisms, North Korea extended outward the concept of agnatic kinship, routinizing family metaphors until they no longer seemed metaphorical and took on a concrete literalness. Over time these symbols would evolve into the “fatherly leader,” the “motherly party,” and the son as the legitimate heir to the Great Leader.<sup>8</sup>

It would hardly be an exaggeration to state that the backbone of Communist China and of Korea and its social structures is one of the most ancient traditions of prioritizing family kinship over other sets of socialist values.

Nevertheless, what seems to be an oxymoronic phenomenon, traditional notions of family structure and hegemony in the North Korean socialist state, at a closer look are actually significant components of modernity<sup>9</sup> in East Asia. This book views family rhetoric as the most fundamental, yet lit-

tle-examined aspect of North Korean sociocultural performances, the study of which will illuminate the reason for the survival of socialism.

The notion of family is one of the central concepts used to assess the dynamics of propaganda performances in this book, and will be articulated on multiple levels of Confucian understanding of self, society, nation, and state.<sup>10</sup> “Family,” on the one hand, refers to various units of human cohabitation related by blood and marriage, such as extended family or nuclear family, to which I refer as “traditional family.” On the other hand, “family” is used as a synonym for nation and race—a concept often found in a totalitarian regime, such as Nazi Germany or colonial Japan in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Korea, such a meaning initially emerged as part of the resistance sentiment against the threat posed by foreign powers, and then was consolidated after Japanese colonization in 1910. The rule by Japan from 1910 to 1945 provided the ground for the rise of nationalism as well as artistic imagination, which made use of family rhetoric as one of the most appealing vehicles for enhancing nationalism.

After World War II, the nationalistic sentiment of the second interpretation of “family” was used as an ideological weapon to forge a strong sense of statehood. I use the term *imagined family* to refer to this notion in the book. The North Korean state emerged from the painful experience of Japanese colonialism, when the loss of sovereignty necessitated finding alternative conduits to address national ideals and crises. “The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor,”<sup>12</sup> remarks Homi Bhabha, whose observation illuminates why the family kinship based on Confucian ideals became the predominant metaphor used in cultural propaganda performances.

The state of North Korea, established in 1948, has been adhering to familial expressions in amending the historical rupture during the colonial period and restoring national dignity. Korea failed to establish a unified nation after World War II, leaving South Korea as the other half of two nations. The North Korean state used—and also abused—this notion of family since it was conscious of its division and incompleteness as a political entity. As a partial representative of the nation, North Korea had to cope with the paradox of asserting itself as the only legitimate embodiment of the Korean national essence while South Korea was making an identical point. In order to establish a congenial national kinship among the people and address Korean partition as a temporary passage that would ultimately lead to unification, the North Korean state appropriated more than what Bhabha calls “linguistic metaphor” and went on to generate powerful visual images and performances, imagining the nation through familiar Confucian family

ideals with an authoritative patriarch and his docile wife, sons, and daughters. North Korea attempted to create a new foundation myth about the father of the socialist state, Kim Il-sung (1912–94), in the form of urban folklore and theatrical and cinematic performances, to the point that theater became a ritual for shaping the realities of everyday life.

The two levels of family are intrinsically related, since many traditional family units disintegrated when Korea resisted the Japanese occupation. Kim Il-sung led his own resistance armies, consisting of poor peasants who were dislocated from their traditional families because of economic hardship but found a sense of imagined family in military brotherhood. As Bea Lewkowicz points out, the wars transformed the sense of real home, and “the communities became a substitute home, in which relationships between its members were perceived in terms of an extended family framework.”<sup>13</sup> However, in the eyes of the socialist revolutionaries and reformers, the oppressive structure of the traditional family was the main culprit in the failure to strengthen Korea in the early twentieth century. Therefore, they made the traditional family one of the central agendas of reform during the struggle against the Japanese and after the establishment of North Korea. In a way, the social movements to free people from a repressive traditional family structure in the first half of the century presaged the effort to establish a classless society in North Korea. For all its fierce rhetoric of eliminating repression, the nation—that is, the imagined family—could literally deconstruct and disperse the traditional family units, as the state pursued land collectivization, aggressive economic reform, and ideological revolution by sending infants to state-run day care centers and mobilizing workers to rural areas.

### Whose Nation-State?

In the aftermath of two world wars and the birth of numerous nation-states from former colonies, the tendency to view the nation as a construct involving people’s imagination gave rise to its treatment as an “imagined political community,”<sup>14</sup> a view articulated in the widely known theories of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner,<sup>15</sup> that the nation is a nonessentialist construction. This book takes into account that invention and imagination are the essential forces needed to project the idea of a nation for communities striving to define their unique identity. But whose imagination? Whose invention? Whose perspectives and voices do we take into account in narrating North Korean history and culture?

The central nation-constructing matrix may diverge widely depending

on the subject who imagines the nation and his or her political interests. Especially in North Korea, where the ability to narrate national history and consolidate community has been monopolized by a singular subject, it becomes even more imperative to ask questions about the considerable absence of historical agency of the people. Researchers need to see through the blunt walls of officially sanctioned narratives and identify the hidden multiple subjects and objects of national imagination. Concurrent with our defining multiple subjects and the objects, we need to give special attention to the specific mode in which the nation is imagined in twentieth-century Korea. The genealogy of this imagination exhibits how people and culture function as variables in the process of constructing the nation, especially in a country where a firmly established traditional system faced an inevitable and unprecedented transformation.

The dynamics in the formation of nationalism arose from various sectors of society, and differed depending on class, gender, generation, and geographic locality, so as to construct competing categories. As Prasenjit Duara aptly points out:

Nationalism is best seen as a relational identity. The multiplicity of nation-views and the idea that political identity is not fixed but shifts between different loci. . . . Consequently, national self contains smaller “others”—historical others that have affected an often uneasy reconciliation among themselves and political others that are beginning to form their differences. And it is the potential others that are most deserving of our attention because they reveal the principle that creates nations—the willing into existence of a nation which will choose to privilege its difference and obscure all the cultural bonds that had tied it to its sociological kin.<sup>16</sup>

Duara notes that “smaller others” are easily overshadowed by the metanarrative of nationalism, which, under the guidance of a national patriarch, tends to sacrifice subaltern social sects for the purpose of rescuing the nation. As Edward Said remarked, anticolonialism could often overshadow the subaltern voices or invisible actors of a nation.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Leela Gandhi reiterates Said’s conviction that “the intellectual strings of anti-colonialism can only be properly realized when nationalism becomes more ‘critical of itself’—when it proves itself capable of directing attention ‘to the abused rights of all oppressed classes.’”<sup>18</sup> Duara’s comment on the overpowering anticolonial desire to reconstruct the lost nation, which lacked self-criticiz-

ing mechanisms and tended to ignore the need to acknowledge “smaller others,” aptly illuminates conventionally overlooked fissures in twentieth-century Korean history.

Based on the postcolonial theories articulated in Duara’s, Said’s, and Gandhi’s works, this book identifies “the woman question” to be one of the most important—although persistently ignored—“smaller others” in the formation of a national self in modern Korea.<sup>19</sup> The discussions of gender and nationalism will be carried out in tandem, with two concrete goals in mind. First, I employ gender studies to critique what nationalism generally ignored under the grand banner of the nation’s survival and reconstruction. Second, merging gender studies with the studies of postcolonialism and nationalism facilitates exploration of the continual existence of the traditional gender and family ideologies within seemingly revolutionized societies. As Neil Diamant has observed: “Modern state-led social change can actually be facilitated by ‘traditional’ inequality between the sexes, as a fairly rigid division between the sexes can make it easier for women to forge identities and communities based on common experiences and grievances.”<sup>20</sup> The second strategy reveals what Diamant perceives as a paradoxical construction of women, which simultaneously signifies modernity and tradition within the Korean socialist state.

The discussion of North Korean women as projected in theater, film, visual culture, and everyday performance is predicated on certain feminist theories and methodologies, which acknowledge the perceived gap between “‘women’ as a discursively constructed group and ‘women’ as material subjects of their own history.”<sup>21</sup> In my view, it is not only useful but also necessary to differentiate these two categories, since identifying and ultimately mending the elision between them will help explain why there is a conspicuous discrepancy between the image of women as essential members of social production, depicted in theatrical and filmic representations of North Korea, and the traditional Confucian practice that limited women’s social mobility in everyday life. The notion of women as material subjects of history implicates the concrete local experiences of twentieth-century Korean women living at a transitional moment of history, rapidly transforming from colonialism to socialism. This book takes the position that material conditions of women in a given historical moment—including gendered space, economic relationships, and social factors that determine women’s mobility—are illustrative of women’s potential to function as subjects in narrating social change.

Thus in studying the family ideology in propaganda performances, this

book reaffirms that gender is a useful category for analyzing theater, film, and everyday performance in North Korea. Gender, in this sense, is not limited to sociohistorical analysis of men's and women's movements in North Korea (i.e., men and women as material subjects of history); it also functions as a crucial aspect of theatrical and cinematic representation (i.e., men and women as discursively constructed groups).

The appearance of women on stage and screen is one of the most striking innovations of North Korean performances as a sociocultural commodity. Compared to the pre-twentieth-century situation of Korean women of decent background, who were strongly discouraged from appearing in any public space, the vision of female characters on stage and screen, performed by actresses, was a revolution in itself from the perspective of gender politics.

While investigating concepts of women and femininity in the social sphere and in North Korean performances, this book attempts to avoid an approach exclusively centered on women. In contrast to a surge of academic inquiries on women and femininity, less attention has been paid to the studies of men and masculinity. Casting a sideways view on the Chinese case, Susan Mann points out that the paucity of studies on Chinese men is particularly vexing because "bonds among men were key to success and survival for rich and poor; elite and commoner, in Chinese history."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Korean men's social identity was defined by the male network, which reached beyond the boundary of the traditional family. Hence, it is imperative that equal attention should be given in this book to the construction of male and female, masculinity and femininity as two aspects of one and the same question of imagining the nation.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, the ability of performing arts to glorify the state father Kim Il-sung as the founder of new tradition and national culture legitimized the leadership vis-à-vis the woman question. At the same time, ordinary male citizens were theatricalized as secondary males, contrasted with the state fathers, often pushed to the peripheries of visual composition on stage and screen.

Such was the distinctive reflection of the ideal Confucian state patriarch that persisted as the backbone of the new socialist culture. North Korean social practices adhere to the long tradition of family values and ideals, often recapitulating the Confucian political catchphrase of addressing the nation as a family unit. Once the various notions of family become the fulcrum of analysis, they are not a radical departure from the past or from the theatrical tradition. These practices of upholding Confucian ideals are the

most fundamental traditions of East Asian culture. This ironically leads to the question: how revolutionary was the seemingly radical culture of the socialist states?

As Cumings claims, Marxism in North Korea merged with the traditional Confucian idea that “rectification of the mind must precede correct action, even to the point of committing the Marxist heresy that ideas determine human reality.”<sup>24</sup> In a similar light, Erik Cornell observes how Marxist doctrines were subsumed by the theoretical guidance of Confucianism in the North Korean context:

The official North Korean ideology has had other sources of inspiration besides Marxism-Leninism. It also contains strong elements of the East Asian heritage of ideas and a good dose of nationalism. The dominating impression is that North Korean communism combines theories taken from Confucianism’s hierarchical worldview and Soviet Russian industrialization ideology of Stalinist vintage, blended to form a unity, the specific Korean characteristic of which they are keen to point out.<sup>25</sup>

Marxism, which was to serve as an explanatory model of how and why the Western capitalist powers would face proletarian revolution, was doubly distorted when it finally reached East Asia.<sup>26</sup> Thus, this project provides an opportunity to rethink the prevalent views of European dominance in cultural development and historical social change in North Korea.

### Only Propaganda

By launching a historical investigation into state-produced propaganda—stage performances, film productions, parades, mass games, and visual arts—as a unique entry point to understanding how otherwise little-known North Korean society and culture function, this book illuminates deep-rooted cultural explanations for the survival of North Korean socialism. At the same time, the project is based on the premise that propaganda is a contested junction where political, social, economic, and cultural trajectories of the North Korean nation collide in an ever-transforming manner.

On one level, North Korean propaganda performance reflects the state’s wishful desire to cultivate its ideal self-portrait. David Holm, in commenting on the Chinese Communist Party’s appropriation of folk art as propaganda, writes:

The general feeling is, of course, that propaganda is lies—in the words of Dr. Goebbels—and that therefore a study of propaganda will yield nothing of value except perhaps a moral lesson on the wickedness of the totalitarian regime. I would suggest that, on the contrary, propaganda is interesting—and revealing—precisely because it is an attempt to manipulate and persuade.<sup>27</sup>

In accordance with Holm's observation that propaganda is a transparent showcase of the regime's intentions, this book looks beyond the political facade and pays close attention to how North Korean propaganda productions manipulate and persuade. Behind the blatantly fictional representation of an ideal self-image lies the *modus operandi* of the state; therefore, I regard propaganda as one of the available ways of understanding North Korea. What may come across as one-dimensional campaigns actually have a tremendous impact on society. The inquiry into how and why propaganda works as a tool of manipulation and persuasion is a revelatory process through which the inner workings of North Korean society and culture loom from behind the facade.

While I treat propaganda as an effective means to understand the formation of North Korean society and culture, I also acknowledge another view of propaganda as a dynamic dialogic process between creator and receiver. In her study of the erotic fantasies of fascism in modern literature, Laura Frost delineates an alternative function of propaganda—complementing the aforementioned definition proposed by Holm—as “a form of communication that can express its creator's inadvertent or unconscious investments (and fantasies) and that can also be read many ways and have unintended effects in its reception.”<sup>28</sup> North Korean propaganda can be a window into the agenda and inner workings of the state. However, such an instrumental approach is based on the naive belief that the state's intention to manipulate and persuade symmetrically translates into actualization of the master plan. The actual operation of propaganda, even in a rigidly controlled society like North Korea, is much more discursive; it does not simply conform to the government's intentions.

The foundational aspect of propaganda is arguably the North Korean people's complicity with the propaganda machinery, without which the system could not have operated to the extent it has for half a century. In order to stage labor-intensive propaganda performances, the North Korean state has used forcible measures to ensure people's participation.<sup>29</sup> In cases where there was a failure to send a required number of participants, the slackers

were immediately punished by reduced food rationing and other means of withholding basic necessities. Despite these practices that stripped people of basic human rights and dignity, at the same time, according to the interviews conducted, the North Korean people seem to have enjoyed the collective shaping experience of performance rehearsals.

This book explores the multifaceted values and functions propaganda holds in North Korea from a performance scholar's point of view. In a narrow sense, this means that the primary case study of propaganda will be theater, including revolutionary operas (*byeongmyeong gageuk*)<sup>30</sup> and film productions<sup>31</sup> and their parallel performance genres, such as mass games, demonstrations, and parades. In a broader sense, however, this means that the theatrical nature of North Korean society will be examined simultaneously.

As will be illuminated in the subsequent chapters, film has been the preferred genre of the state. However, there is no strict sense of division between theater and film in North Korean performing arts, since most live stage performances are produced with the intention of being filmed for wider circulation among the population.<sup>32</sup> In order to guarantee that stage productions are seen throughout the nation, the North Korean propaganda bureau films them whenever possible. The films and filmed stage productions, including five revolutionary operas, have become a dominant cultural form for North Koreans, since every citizen has to watch them as part of their mandatory education in revolutionary ideology and discuss how to emulate ideal stage characters during daily study sessions in schools and at work.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, these filmed productions provide materials for staging mass games and parades, which are the culminating annual celebrations of the state leaders' birthdays and the rituals commemorating the foundation of the state: On the birthdays of Kim Il-sung (born April 15, 1912), the founding father of North Korea, and Kim Jong-il (born February 16, 1942), the current head of the state, numerous mass games, stage performances, and street parades are performed throughout North Korea. Thus, theater and film productions are not confined to stage and screen, but reach out to the daily lives of North Koreans and have become easily recognizable cultural experiences. Other visual media, such as posters<sup>34</sup> and fine art, have also participated by endlessly reproducing iconic images from these cultural productions. Thus, feature films, revolutionary operas, and their filmed versions not only produce theatrical/cinematic illusions within theater space but also are at the center of the theatrical nature of everyday life.

The intersection between the actual study of theater genres and the theater of everyday life challenges us to construe theatricality as a resilient and encompassing notion in a country like North Korea. A seminal idea with which to tap into the otherwise little-known North Korean society and culture, the term *theatricality*, as theater historians Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait have noted, “is a concept so widely and loosely used that it is comprehensive of all meanings yet empty of all sense.” However, as Davis and Postlewait argue, the history of how the concept has been used helps theater scholars to identify some of the modes in which theatrical representation and everyday reality define each other: “Just as theatricality has been used to describe the gap between reality and representation—a concept for which there is a perfectly good and very specific term, *mimesis*—it has also been used to describe the ‘heightened’ states when everyday reality is exceeded by its representation.”<sup>35</sup>

Both of these functions of theatricality are useful for this study of how represented reality in propaganda, like the aforementioned 2003 parade scene, supersedes everyday life in North Korea. In the concept of *mimesis*, there is an embedded assumption that reality and representation are fundamentally different, so that representation has to make a conscious effort to imitate reality in an assimilative mode. But when producers of theater and film regard everyday reality as inferior to represented reality, and invent utopian versions of reality and present them for audiences to emulate, theatricality becomes the key notion, the staged version of reality when the representation of everyday life exceeds everyday life itself. This is the reversal of *mimesis*: that is, everyday reality is in a position to imitate the represented reality. North Korea is a theatrical state par excellence precisely because it forces a utopian illusion to mandate conditions of real life. Perpetually obsessed with appropriating the utopian narrative for staging its ideal self-image and directing its citizens as if they were actors playing stereotypical roles found in revolutionary operas, I claim, with neither hesitation nor exaggeration, that the North Korean state, with its well-developed propaganda apparatus, fabricates the foundation of every sociocultural reality.

### Ethics of Ethnography

North Korea is a case where theatricality is taken to the extreme, to the degree that sacrificing individuals for the sake of producing hyperreal national images becomes acceptable. Just as “torture was not accidental quality of this

Third Reich, but its essence,”<sup>36</sup> in many cases, forfeiting basic human rights of its own people has been the very premise of the North Korean self-representation in propaganda performances. The state gladly removes undesirable objects for the cultivation of its immaculate national landscape. Therefore, anyone delving into discussions of—or participating in—the theatricality of North Korean society cannot fully dodge ethical responsibility.

Moreover, George W. Bush’s infamous “Axis of Evil” speech in 2001 made North Korea an even more contested hotbed of arguments and debates waged by academics and policymakers alike. Many have projected their given agenda on North Korea without taking a very close look at the country, either to uphold the moral lessons of how and why Communism does not work or to critique the appallingly dogmatic attitude of the United States and its wartime allies. As a scholar whose primary goal is to bring new knowledge about North Korea to the world, I find it increasingly difficult to claim intellectual objectivity. Under the current polarized circumstances, I am often pressured by both human rights activists and the academic Left to take a clear political stance. If this book focused primarily on the state-sponsored violence in North Korea, it might win the favor of human rights activists around the world. By the same token, if this book only argued for the legitimacy of the North Korean state, it could easily serve as an instrument for the Marxist Left to talk back to neoconservatives. “Either you’re for us, or you’re against us” has been stated by both Communists who diminished socialist ideals to the worst kind of totalitarian rule and Western crusaders who distorted freedom to persecute the Other. Such an exclusionist attitude not only betrays the core of what scholarship is supposed to achieve but also negates the complexity of human existence. North Korea is a complex and contradictory country, like anywhere else in the world: on the one hand, the government has demonstrated remarkable achievements in modernizing the postcolonial state; on the other hand, it has committed unthinkable atrocities and violence. The purpose of my research is to bring out these complexities so that we become more sophisticated in our approach, moving beyond extreme positions of idolization or accusation, which have so dominated discourse on North Korea. As Max Horkheimer proclaimed, “There should be a study on terror but not to denounce its frightfulness, for that has been done enough with both good and bad conscience. Rather, its usefulness in certain social situations should be explained.”<sup>37</sup>

The primary objective of this book does not rest on moral accusations of a regime that reduces its people to mere disposable props for a self-aggrandizing show. However, I have tried my best to be cognizant of the many

ways the theatrical displays examined tie into a larger matrix of human rights abuses in North Korea. Even though theoretical explications of how the state uses performing arts and theatricality are the basis of this book, these theoretical issues often belie the atrocious human conditions of that country, which is what really concerns ordinary North Koreans. I regard these two seemingly opposite poles of my research—the objective analysis of how theatricality operates in North Korea and the ethical responsibility of a scholar studying human suffering—to be mutually inclusive problems. Throughout this book, I hope to illuminate that a close reading of how performance functions as formidable means of control will deepen our understanding of the actual conditions of North Korean people's lives.

Very often in North Korea, basic daily activities—such as eating, dressing, and speaking—become the objects of state control, which in turn becomes a legitimate field of inquiry for performance scholars interested in the modes by which the state sets out to regulate how people present themselves. These acts of mundane life are rehearsed on a daily basis to be heightened as revolutionary achievements, through learning from the heroes in theater and film productions, an essential part of education in schools and places of work.

Moreover, the everyday ritual that equates rehearsal with the process of becoming an ideal North Korean citizen not only aims at presenting a final performance but also is an end in itself, with instrumental advantages of disciplining people to embody collective life. Richard Schechner has noted the significance of the rehearsal process as an integral part of the culminating performance, in that it plays a key role in shaping the collective. For Schechner, preparation becomes an important part of the ritual, inviting community members to participate as performers.<sup>38</sup> However, Schechner's understanding of community-based ritual is voluntary and therefore volatile at times, whereas community-based ritual in North Korea is situated in a radically different environment in which the formation of community is not fluid and voluntary, but a systematic procedure controlled by the harsh principles of selection and elimination.

For North Korean people, transforming daily lives into rehearsals dictates the precise inscription of the correct modes of self-presentation onto their bodies. This is why the process of preparing a performance is functionally much more significant than the result. In this respect, John MacAloon's idea of "ritual as duty," as opposed to "spectacle as a choice,"<sup>39</sup> is useful for understanding the function of community ritual in North Korea. As a result, Schechner's conceptualization must be modified: the prepa-

ration process becomes the phase that exceeds the culminating performance. Aiming at social control by forcing people to participate in state ritual is North Korea's most efficient governing strategy. Its implementation requires constant institutional surveillance, which has been achieved by the North Korean regime as far as it procures people's complicity.

However, the modes in which North Koreans participate in state-initiated rehearsals and performances are much more discursive than can be labeled as forced enjoyment, reluctance, fear, or suffering. In interviews I conducted with North Korean defectors, reminiscing about their community rituals at times conjured up fond memories of bonding with classmates or wild expectations of seeing the greatest national heroes, namely Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, in person in the grandiose capital city of Pyongyang. Therefore, my analysis of North Korean propaganda based on ethnographic research will consider multilayered implications of rehearsal and performance rituals from various perspectives: performance producers, participants, and deserters of the regime. Each chapter is a step-by-step explanation of how such viewpoints interact on various levels of performance medium, space, ideology, and strategy.

Chapter 1, "Hybridization of Performance Genres," focuses on the process of inventing the ideal form of propaganda in North Korea. Kim Jong-il's cinemania is well known to many people in the outside world, but the impact it has had in organizing and regulating North Korean society has not been fully explored. Thus, this chapter looks at how and why North Korean propaganda prioritized film over other forms of art, most notably theater, in order to investigate the rationale for the government propaganda department's choice of film as its primary medium, which had a lasting impact on live stage productions. Although the demise of live theater seems to have changed the landscape of performing arts, amateur acting has flourished in everyday life with the political educational program for ordinary citizens, who are supposed to learn from the films and filmed theater productions shown in schools and workplaces.

Chapter 2, "Time and Space in North Korean Performance," addresses how North Korean propaganda performances create a seamless visual continuum between the physical space of the nation and the illusionary utopian space of stage and screen. The social and artistic significance of the projected theatrical and filmic image of North Korea exceeds that of the actual space, as the utopia created by theater and film techniques has dictated the formation of the actual North Korean landscape. The semiotic dichotomy between urban and rural, as well as between the dark prerevolutionary past

and projected utopian future, illustrates the contrapuntal national landscape of the newly established socialist fatherland.

Chapter 3, “Revival of the State Patriarchs,” examines the structure and ideology behind patriarchal family life as performed in propaganda. Confucian patriarchal family ideology and structure, well known to every North Korean, are the primary rhetorical figures appropriated by the government for propaganda. By using the familiar traditional form to propagate revolutionary ideology, the North Korean state could easily make its people relate to propaganda performances, which were relatively new cultural commodities. In this process, Kim Il-sung was idolized as the creator of national culture whose legitimacy to rule was rightfully transferred to his biological son Kim Jong-il, a ritual that enacted the prioritization of the imagined family over traditional family.

Chapter 4, “Model Citizens of the Family-Nation,” looks at how North Korean propaganda transformed the traditional structure of the patriarchal family, as the ultimate state father relegated the traditional family patriarchs to secondary males by projecting them as his docile children. This necessitated creating a visible boundary between the legitimate members of the imagined family and the enemies of the family-nation, which in turn serves as a useful educational theme in daily performance. Theater and film train North Koreans to identify the enemy as a way of reinforcing a sense of community. The dual identities of citizen and performer merge for North Korean people in the liminal zone where theatrical illusion blends into everyday life.

Chapter 5, “Acting Like Women in North Korea,” examines the process in which North Korean women gained prominence and visibility in propaganda performances as righteous agents carrying out revolutionary tasks. The shifting power and gender dynamics and family rhetoric are examined through visual signs manifested by costumes, props, and bodily gestures in performing arts and visual culture vis-à-vis social policy regarding women. These signs expose the discrepancy between the utopian images of liberated and revolutionized women and the North Korean state’s perfunctory promotion of gender equality, which remains rhetorical at best.

Chapter 6, “Performing Paradoxes: Staging Utopia, Upstaging Dystopia,” addresses the paradoxical performances that have come out of North Korea since the 1994 death of Kim Il-sung. Because of economic hardship, conflict with major world powers, and its own desire to join the world community, gaps and fissures started to appear in the state’s official self-presentation, originating from—and also leading to—a gradual trans-

formation of North Korean society. Two related, conspicuous forms of national performance in recent years are brought to conversation: the conditions of human rights and tourism, with a special focus on North Korea's Arirang Festival, a mass gymnastic performance designed to attract foreign tourists. I look at how the global flow of finance and media has reacted to North Korea's desire, spurred by economic crisis, to stage an ideal national image for tourism and the regime's brutal, but futile, efforts to hide epidemic hunger by hunting down escapees. The conjunction of tourism and hunger, as oxymoronic as it may sound, reveals the manipulative principles of North Korean propaganda and the state's desire to display or conceal its people on an international stage over the past fifty years. The book finally examines the 2006 musical *Yoduk Story* (*Yodeok seutori*), the only known North Korean dissident performance that addresses North Korea as the antithesis of utopia. By countering the idealized thesis of official North Korean propaganda for the first time, the musical made its mark in performing arts history; however, this counterpropaganda disturbingly replicates the same strategies found in official North Korean propaganda and thereby absurdly underlines the contagious power of the official culture of North Korea.

The fundamental paradoxes of the North Korean reality—the Confucian socialist state, women's nominal liberation, and staging utopia at the expense of creating dystopia—account for the inexplicable traits of North Korean society and culture, which has established the first and the only known hereditary socialist state in history. Only the future can tell us whether such paradoxes will sustain the nation.

### Prologue: Kim Jong-il's "Guests" and North Korea's Cultural Crisis

On October 19, 1983, in Kim Jong-il's office at the Central Party Building in Pyongyang, a private conversation took place between Kim and two South Korean filmmakers: director Sin Sang-ok and his actress wife Choe Eun-hui, who had spent five years in North Korea after they had been abducted and brought there under Kim Jong-il's personal direction in 1978.<sup>40</sup> That day, Sin and Choe secretly recorded what they describe as "Kim Jong-il's tirade-like monologue rather than a dialogue between Kim and us," which lasted for more than two hours.<sup>41</sup> According to the transcript of this recording, Kim Jong-il was struggling with the questions of how to elevate North Korean film to an advanced level without jeopardizing the tight control of its people:

We send our people to East Germany to study editing, to Czechoslovakia to study camera technology, and to the Soviet Union to learn directing. Other than that, we cannot send our people to go anywhere since they are enemy states. No France, no West Germany, no Great Britain. We especially have to have exchange with Japan, but we cannot even allow [North Korean people] to watch Japanese films. We end up analyzing foreign films to imitate them, but there is limit to what we can do, and our efforts have brought no progress. I have been struggling with this problem for five years [since 1978]. All we ended up doing was to send a couple of people to the Soviet Union after the liberation and to establish a film institute, but they are not that impressive after all. I acknowledge that we lag behind in filmmaking techniques. We have to know that we are lagging behind and make efforts to raise a new generation of filmmakers.<sup>42</sup>

Although very little is known about North Korean cinema in the outside world, many have heard of the “beloved leader” Kim Jong-il’s intimate relationship with film. As this speech testifies, he played a wide range of roles in North Korean cinema—from producer, editor, and scriptwriter to critic, historian, and visionary.

According to the director Sin, Kim Jong-il is not only a dedicated film producer, but he is also a highly talented critic of drama and music, allegedly capable of pinpointing a single out-of-tune instrument from a full orchestra.<sup>43</sup> Further accounts by Sin point out that Kim’s boundless knowledge in arts owes to a large amount of materials collected from around the world, materials he has been systematically compiling over a long period of time. Sin had a chance to see Kim Jong-il’s enormous private collection of films, which he thought was possibly the largest of its kind in the world:

On March 14, 1983, Eun-hui [Sin’s wife] and I were invited to a tour of the Film Archive. I hurriedly got prepared because this was a place I always wanted to visit. The Film Archive stood on the hills in the middle of Pyongyang. Tightly locked heavy metal doors guarded the archive, and no people were to be seen. This was a controlled access area. . . . We were invited inside for a briefing and were told that 15,000 copies of films were stored here. Nearly 250 employees, including voice actors, translators, subtitle specialists, projectionists, and recording specialists, were working for this facility. The films at the archive came from all around the world—from both Communist and capitalists, developed

and underdeveloped countries alike. The size of the three-story building measured up to that of any main school buildings in South Korea. As I was listening to the briefing of an archive employee, I thought that this could possibly be the largest [private] collection in the entire world. After the briefing, the manager took us around for a tour. The width of the building was about 100 meters, and all three stories stretching 100 meters were filled with films. The room with the best equipment was the one holding North Korean films. In that room every single North Korean film ever made was stored in chronological order. The room boasted a perfect temperature and humidity control system.<sup>44</sup>

Sin goes on to say that after this impressive introduction, he was given permission to visit the Film Archive and watch all kinds of movies as much as he wished. Access to this building was limited to those who were recommended by Kim Jong-il himself, and for this reason there was an archive employee whose only responsibility was to take care of communications with Kim Jong-il's office, which testifies to the fact that the archive was indeed a private one. Choe and Sin also noticed that all of Kim Jong-il's residences across North Korea have projection rooms, where Kim is known to watch films almost every night.<sup>45</sup> Kim Jong-il was a highly motivated autodidact of world films, which, according to Sin, made Kim Jong-il's cinematic knowledge and talent surpass those of other North Korean filmmakers. Most filmmakers were barred from using this library owing to North Korea's stringent ideological control, and consequently it was difficult for any filmmaker's understanding of world cinema to measure up to Kim Jong-il's knowledge.

Kim Jong-il's predilection for film became a well-known story through the accounts of the few people who had a rare chance to work closely with him. Director Sin was one of those inadvertently chosen ones who had a rare glimpse of Kim Jong-il's involvement in North Korean films while assisting him to realize his grand cinematic vision. In the mainstream media, this bizarre story of the abduction of the South Korean couple has often served as a popular entry point for exploring the psychotic nature of the "Dear Leader." Nonetheless, the fact that the North Korean leader chose South Korean filmmakers, citizens of the sworn enemy state, to bail the local film industry he had fostered out of the cultural dead end it found itself in provides us with the opportunity to delve deeper into more complex issues surrounding North Korean society and culture, such as the regime's attempts to strike a balance between outside culture and indigenous culture

and the ways in which the North Korean leadership envisioned culture as an effective tool for shaping the minds of its people. Although Sin and Choe's book offers an in-depth analysis of the films produced by the kidnapped South Korean couple, we will look at the presence of this film couple as a way of exploring a complex matrix into which North Korean society's contradictions and ironies are woven. The filmmakers' book provides an opportunity to think about North Korea's culture as a highly politicized form of power.

The kidnapping was a drastic measure that the frustrated visionary came up with after he assumed full power as heir designate. Kim Jong-il's conversation with Sin and Choe took place in 1983, but Kim had been struggling with the inherent North Korean contradictions since he entered politics in the late 1970s, and he saw the power of film and art in general as the primary source of, or his way to, governance.

The film industry is a collaborative field operated by multiple constituencies because it is a medium produced, circulated, and consumed on a massive scale, which makes it impossible to imagine that one person's initiative and taste can shape the contours of film production for an entire nation. But as the aforementioned episodes illustrate, Kim Jong-il's opinion has a formative influence on every aspect of cultural production in North Korea, which makes it very difficult to imagine North Korean film production without Kim's personal intervention.<sup>46</sup>

What is often overlooked in the world's fascination about Kim Jong-il's cinemania, however, is that the function of film as an essentially political tool was already established long before his coming to power, and it is precisely by means of mobilizing film's political potential that he ascended to become the successor of his father, strengthening his position as he further intensified the importance of film. Beginning at the establishment of North Korea in 1948, Kim Jong-il's father, Kim Il-sung, openly recognized film's potential to serve his political direction more effectively than any other means of communication. Although at the time of the founding of North Korea, "Kim Il-sung's comrades from the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle in Manchuria was comprised of the least educated of the Communist 'factions' and the least involved in cultural affairs,"<sup>47</sup> Kim Il-sung nevertheless followed the examples of other socialist states and recognized the edifying potential of film for his newly founded republic.

Kim Il-sung learned a valuable lesson from Lenin and Mao, who held in high regard film's potential to serve as effective propaganda. Lenin himself presaged film's ability to penetrate the illiterate masses and concluded: "For

us the most important of all arts is cinema.”<sup>48</sup> For the same reasons, the film industry in China was fully utilized by Nationalists and Communists alike in order to educate and mobilize the masses. Historian Charles Armstrong enumerated the reasons why the Soviet leaders adhered to film as a major tool to serve politics, which functions as a useful reference to examine the North Korean case:

The Bolsheviks were attracted to the propaganda potential of film for several reasons. In a vast, diverse, predominantly agricultural and largely illiterate society such as the Soviet Union, cinema could reach far more people than, for example, literature. Furthermore, the novelty of film and the immediate power of its imagery made film, or so the Soviet leadership believed, particularly effective. Film-viewing itself was a public, collective act and therefore even the mode of viewing could be a means of instilling collective consciousness. Finally, the great expenses of making films allowed the state to control cinematic production more easily than other arts.<sup>49</sup>

The aforementioned reasons why the Soviets privileged film for propaganda over other media—ease of controlling the filmmaking process, film’s ability to reach out to a wider population, the novelty of the cinematic medium to attract attention from a wide range of population, and film consumption as a collective process furthering a collective consciousness—apply to the North Korean situation well.

The film production process requires massive participation and consumption. The collective nature of producing film simulates well the way North Koreans lead their lives in various collective organizations.<sup>50</sup> The filmmaking process of shooting, editing, and watching others’ lives mirrors how North Koreans constantly monitor one another in their daily lives. Put otherwise, to watch, to be watched, to make a presentable showcase through editing all represent major principles of the North Korean way of life. This point reinforces I U-yeong’s observation of why “underground literature is difficult to detect, but underground cinema is difficult to make,”<sup>51</sup> since the production process is not only collective but also highly controlled to the degree that it does not allow for any improvisations or accidents to take place. From the planning stage to the final cut, filmmakers repeat the production process to achieve the image they desire, which resonates with the way North Koreans filter their language and behavior to abide by the rules. The rehearsal process of these productions could be



Figure 2. A mural on the outside wall of a theater in Pyongyang. A filmmaker with a camera is depicted as fully participating in the revolutionary march of the people. On the right side of the image, characters from well-known revolutionary films, such as *Kkot-bun* in *Flower Girl* and *Mother in Sea of Blood*, join the march. (Photo courtesy of an anonymous donor.)

viewed not only as a means to reach a goal of producing an end product, but as an end in itself. Put otherwise, the didactic nature of the production process becomes one of the most significant purposes of producing films.

On a more empirical level, the reason why film gained a prominent place in North Korea is because it allowed for easy and fast circulation around the country. Theater productions, in contrast, had to send people, props, and costumes to provinces, which could be a costly and slow process, whereas film reels could easily reach far ends of the North Korean territory. For these reasons, the North Korean state makes hundreds of copies of each new North Korean production to be sent nationwide. However, the distribution of film reels reflects the inherent hierarchy of various sectors within the country as the government sends color copies to large cities and black-and-white ones to rural areas. It is not at all surprising to see that films about the leaders are developed in the highest quality, using only U.S. Kodak or Japanese Fuji films and the highest-quality chemicals.<sup>52</sup>

Although rural areas are given secondary treatment in terms of film distribution, to a rural peasant with no previous exposure to film whatsoever the central government's efforts to reach out with unfamiliar yet marvelous moving images must have been a welcome event. Thus, no matter how dogmatic or one-dimensional the content of film might have been, the novelty of film as a new medium must have attracted the attention of the vast majority of the North Korean population. In the absence of other competing media, film soon became the newborn state's most prestigious art form, so as to deserve the highest regard from its leader. In the 1960s Kim Il-sung wrote:

Film is the best form of propaganda for the party. It can be shown to multitude of people in multiple places. Film is capable of projecting a long period of history in just a couple of hours. It is a better form than novels or newspapers in educating workers. Film is also superior to theatre in a sense that it is not confined by the boundaries of stage.<sup>53</sup>

Kim Il-sung's commitment to film encompassed a broad spectrum of plans to nourish the North Korean film industry in a tangible way. It promised filmmakers training, educational opportunities, and better wages, which, according to Armstrong, was the reason why many artists from South Korea defected to the North in the aftermath of division in 1945.<sup>54</sup>

The Soviet occupiers of the North provided an ideal atmosphere for filmmaking, but the situation changed soon after. Although Kim Il-sung initially assumed the role of apprentice in relation to the Soviet and the Chinese leaders' tutelage, under Kim's encouragement, North Korea began to devise highly nationalistic films distinctively changed from their Soviet or Chinese counterparts. His son Kim Jong-il inherited the state's vision of film's irreplaceable importance in grooming a distinctively nationalistic sentiment. The nationalistic tendency and ethnocentric impulse of North Korean film and performance became a highly effective means of delineating the boundary between "us" and "them," comrades and enemies, and it functioned as a managing principle of the North Korean society.

The rise of Kim Jong-il as the producer of numerous productions and arbiter of creative principles merges with a decrease in the coverage of information about world culture and arts within North Korea. Although early North Korean art was in fierce pursuit of dogmatic revolutionary ideology, North Korean publications beginning in the late 1940s covered a fair amount of international arts news and kept up a dynamic flow of informa-

tion. However, the relatively free flow of information gradually started to diminish with the launch of the personal cult of Kim Il-sung in the 1960s. This tendency continued into the 1970s, when Kim Jong-il gradually rose to become a prominent figure in arts and politics. Sacrificing the relatively free flow of information was a necessary step in solidifying the monolithic leadership of the Kim family.

The importance of this rather obvious fact of isolation is contrasted with the fact that the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, never severed himself from the dynamic development of world cinema, although average North Koreans were shown only dogmatic productions, mostly domestic, with only occasional exposure to films from the socialist bloc.

When reading arts-related publications coming out of North Korea from the late 1950s to recent times, one is struck by the dwindling of coverage of world culture over time. In the 1950s, North Korean publications covered an impressive array of world theater, dance, and film. The opening issue of *Joseon Yesul* (*North Korean Art*), arguably the most important journal covering North Korean arts, was published in September 1956, and it featured columns exclusively dedicated to the coverage of the world stage, from both the Communist and the Western spheres. Among the works introduced were Soviet-American collaborative film projects, the opening of the children's theater in Beijing, Italian actress Anna Magnani's 1955 Oscar for best actress, the opening of *Nekrasov* in London's Unity Theatre, and the development of Polish film theaters in the 1950s.<sup>55</sup> However, in just a year, this colorful array of worldly coverage soon narrowed down to the cultural activities of socialist states, such as the success of the Soviet and the PRC troupes in Indonesia, Egypt, and Iran.<sup>56</sup> The March 1957 issue of *Joseon Yesul*, the seventh volume, was the last one to run a world theater column.

Information about the international coverage of films that came from both Communist and capitalist regimes lasted much longer than other cultural topics. In the early 1960s, for example, Ri So-hun wrote an article in *Joseon Yeonghwa* (*North Korean Film*) introducing a brief history of Italian films,<sup>57</sup> and Kim Jeong-ho wrote a series of articles that provided an overview of the 1920s French avant-garde films and filmmakers, such as Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and Germaine Dulac's *Arabesque*.<sup>58</sup> The magazine covered a fairly decent number of international film festivals, such as the Venice International Film Festival, the Asian-African Film Festival,<sup>59</sup> and the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.<sup>60</sup> By the end of 1966, however, the journal's rich coverage of world films gradually narrowed down in scope to cover Marxist-Leninist techniques and ideology in filmmaking.<sup>61</sup>

As if resisting the Soviet Union's de-Stalinization campaign and the attack on personality cults the campaign represented, the North Korean media started in 1957 to promote Kim Il-sung's unchallenged position. Beginning in the 1960s, it became obvious that the cult of Kim Il-sung began to intensify in all realms of the arts. The inner covers of the magazine, which used to feature various still shots of films and actors, started to publish Kim Il-sung's photos and instructions continuously. The October 1960 issue of *Joseon Yeonghwa* even published a photo of Kim Il-sung with his retinue on the cover, an image that seemed to have absolutely no relation to the arts world whatsoever . . . or did it?

*Joseon Yeonghwa* featuring the face of the cultural czar symbolically gestures toward the displacement of international art and culture for an indigenous political model, a shift that North Korea would live with for many years to come. The shift in cultural production from international to local,

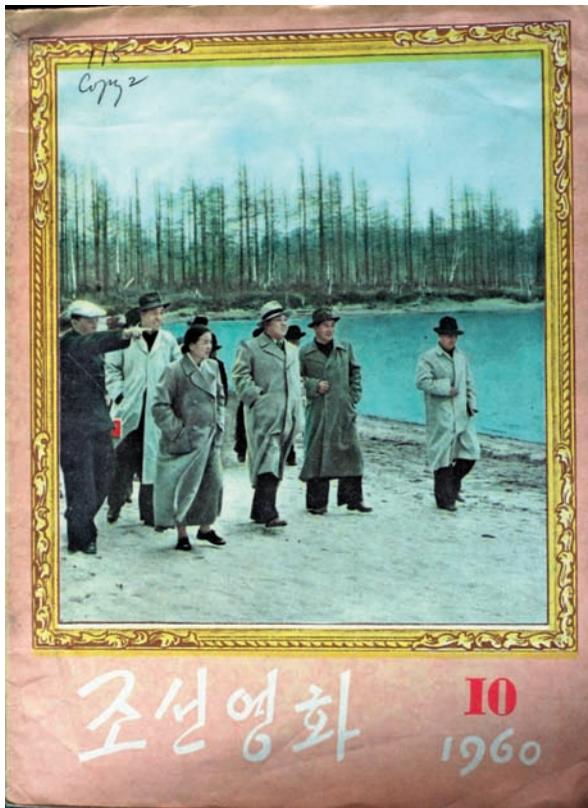


Figure 3. The cover image of the October 1960 issue of *Joseon Yeonghwa*, featuring Kim Il-sung.

multicultural to dogmatic, was a well-choreographed move by the North Korean leadership. As obvious as Kim Jong-il's fascination with film was, it is only fair to state that Kim Jong-il's open manifestation of cinemania is not only his personal proclivity but also a natural result of searching for the most efficient way to gain political capital within the leadership and manage the North Korean people's worldview.

According to director Sin, the reason Kim Jong-il was chosen as heir apparent to his father Kim Il-sung was twofold: having witnessed the de-Stalinization campaign in the Soviet Union and the degradation of Mao Zedong in the PRC, Kim Il-sung was concerned with the possibilities of suffering the same posthumous insult. Taking these factors into account, director Sin argues that Kim Jong-il earned his privilege to be the heir designate by effectively building the cult of his father by means of the performing and visual arts.<sup>62</sup> Sin's view is both persuasive and illuminating for understanding Kim Jong-il's rise to power as ultimately related to his successful cultural productions glorifying Kim Il-sung. Many scholars assume that Kim Jong-il was officially designated as the heir to Kim Il-sung in the late 1970s, which, indeed, follows Kim Jong-il's intensive yet highly successful deification of his father as the legitimate ruler of Korea and the canonization of his household through revolutionary operas and films in the early 1970s. Film, in this sense, is not only an object of Kim Jong-il's personal interest but also a highly effective apparatus to increase incrementally Kim's political capital.

But Kim Jong-il's cinematic journey does not stop here. He took one additional step in appropriating film as an instrument for domestic politics: he attempted to bring in innovative techniques to the filmmaking industry and made visible efforts to diversify North Korean film. According to Sin, this seemed to have been motivated by Kim Jong-il's desire to increase the ability of North Korean films to gain visibility and notoriety in the international arena through festivals circuits and even commercial releases. Kim Jong-il set as his ultimate cinematic goal to win the hearts and minds of the international audience. If Kim Il-sung endowed film with a mighty social status as an adequate tool to carry out propaganda, Kim Jong-il strove to achieve higher filmic standards in order to compete with world cinema.

Yet Kim Jong-il's task of enhancing the artistic quality of film while keeping in mind the notion of film as the most effective propaganda tool was paradoxical in nature, as it required him constantly to mediate arts and politics without compromising either one. He had two conflicting realizations about North Korean film: he believed it was the best political instru-

ment he possessed as a ruler, but he also believed that North Korean film could benefit from diversification that would enhance its artistic value. How could he elevate North Korean film to compete with world cinema without opening up the borders of the country? How could he improve actors' performances and create competition without taking away the central government's subsidy, which was the only way to finance any film production?

These questions bring us back to the private conversation introduced earlier. Kim Jong-il's struggle to seamlessly mediate propaganda and arts in film is known to us thanks to the risk Sin and Choe took in recording their conversation with him on October 19, 1983, in his office. Kim in this conversation honestly expressed his frustrations over North Korean films as underdeveloped as children in kindergarten, whereas the South Korean film industry was approaching its full maturity like college students.<sup>63</sup> Such an acknowledgment creates a stark contrast with his official speeches and writings, in which he extols the virtues of North Korean cinema and socialist cinema as a whole vis-à-vis their corrupt capitalist counterparts.<sup>64</sup> Kim was well aware of the inertia of his film staff, which he believed was due to a lack of competition and their excessive reliance on the central government support: "Since the government is taking care of the pay and basic needs of writers, they are not motivated to produce more scenarios. When requested to do so, they want to be sent to sanatoriums or resorts to work on it."<sup>65</sup> When Sin told Kim Jong-il there was a need to change the typical propaganda style and produce heroic movies in the American Western style in order to make them more interesting and effectively didactic, Kim Jong-il was fully in accord.<sup>66</sup>

This encounter brought about a dramatic change in North Korean filmmaking in the 1980s, when the element of entertainment together with propagandistic value became one of the fulcrums of what sustains North Korean film. Director Sin's presence in the North Korean film industry from 1983 to 1986, during which time he directed six feature films in collaboration with his wife and supervised thirteen, helps account for such a turn in North Korean film. But it was Kim Jong-il's determination that opened the door for the change to take place. Kim openly acknowledged to Sin and Choe during their private conversation: "When director Sin asked me [the other day] why we do not host an international film festival, I was ashamed to admit it then, but I admit it now. We really do not have any films to present. What kind of North Korean film could we show to the entire world? We do not have any films that will make the world laugh and cry."<sup>67</sup> Kim took *Star of Joseon* (1980–87), the sacrosanct epic film series that deifies his

family history traced back to his grandfather's household, as an example of how propaganda and art have become mutually exclusive in North Korean filmmaking: "*Star of Joseon* is history. It is suitable for those who have difficult time reading history, but it is not art. It is history."<sup>68</sup>

Kim knew that there was a way to advance the film industry by learning from the world's experience. The painful realization tempted Kim to absorb the advanced technology of Western filmmaking, but this desire presented problems that had to be curbed by North Korea's political line. The discrepancy that rose from limited political freedom and the desire to catch up with the rest of the world in filmic standards was the dilemma metonymically standing for the entire social problem Kim was facing in the 1980s when North Korea's neighbor and ally China was living North Korea's hypothetical situation as reality. In his private conversation with the South Korean film couple, Kim bluntly admitted:

When I met with Hu Yaobang of the PRC, he honestly told me that China partially opened up its doors to learn advanced technology, but young people started imitating only Western appearance, growing beards and long hair. It's the same with us. If we start airing foreign films on TV and everywhere, then only nihilistic thoughts will emerge out of them. Our country is now divided and we must foster national dignity and pride. We cannot simply worship foreign things, so we must raise the level of our technology and then open our country to foreign things, but this is paradoxical in itself. So I want to give [the film industry] partial autonomy within the given limits.<sup>69</sup>

This primary contradiction Kim faced—to renovate the ailing North Korean film industry without the danger of opening North Korea to the outside world—thus led to a twisted solution in the abduction of a South Korean couple. And just as Kim had hoped, the couple did so well with their string of film productions that they even managed to claim some degree of fame on the international festival circuit, mostly featuring films from the socialist bloc, by winning the special jury prize for directing *Special Envoy Who Never Returned* (*Doraaji anneun milsa*) at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 1984 and the best actress award for Choe's performance in *Salt* (*Sogeum*) at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1985.

Sin and Choe's given task in North Korea was not limited to renovating the North Korean film industry and charting out a place for it on the map of world cinema. The fact that they were the chosen guests of Kim Jong-il

surreptitiously pointed to alternate possibilities for understanding North Korean cultural policies: If all Kim Jong-il wanted was to innovate North Korean cinema and achieve international claim, he could have made exceptions by sending a few North Korean directors to the Western world to bring back advanced filmmaking technology or by inviting directors from Japan or other advanced countries to North Korea for a limited time. Instead, Kim Jong-il decided to choose South Koreans for reasons dictated not entirely by the aesthetics of filmmaking but by the ethnicities of the filmmakers. The fact that Sin and Choe were Koreans must have been a determining factor in Kim's decision precisely for the reason that Kim envisioned the couple functioning as a cultural buffer filtering and bringing in Western cinema through the disguised forms of Korean ethnicity.

Ethnic cohesion—especially because Sin was originally from North Korea—was a sublimated process of bringing in foreign influences under the well-known political banner of *uri minjok-kkiri*, or “Our people [deal] with each other [without foreign interference].” This sentiment implied Kim's desire to improve (North) Korean film with the help of (South) Koreans without any foreign cultural intervention; this aptly served the ideological foundation of *juche*.<sup>70</sup>

By having South Koreans make North Korean films embodying North Korean ideology, Kim Jong-il hoped to project South Koreans in general as North Korea's revolutionary project. As the North Korean leadership saw it, South Korean civilians were subjects placed under the wrong leadership and therefore should be liberated from the oppression of corrupt South Korean capitalists and foreign imperialists. In this light, Sin and Choe were officially projected as prodigal children who were temporarily led astray under a wrong set of political and cultural influences, but were finally rescued and brought back to where they originally belonged. They were supposed to showcase the North Korean belief that the only good South Korean was the one liberated by North Koreans.

But was this propaganda project really a transparent process where the directions of the Dear Leader were symmetrically transmitted to his guests as hostages? Were there no subversive moments in Sin's and Choe's careers in North Korea when they secretly bit the hands that brought them there and provided for them? The irony of their presence is doubled when we consider that the almighty cultural leader had to depend on his prisoners for promoting North Korean cinematic standards, which were to serve as the models for everyday life in North Korea. The inversion of power relations—in which Sin and Choe were the guiding light for Kim, the prison-

ers providing the jailer with visions of the rescue of North Korea—symptomatically signals the intricate dynamics of what North Korea officially put on display at the expense of suppressing other heretical factors into silence and invisibility.

Although covered in the veil of revolutionary ideology, there are fissures and gaps in the movies Sin and Choe produced, which allows for subversive readings challenging conventional ways of understanding their work as faithfully serving Kim's regime.<sup>71</sup> It is undeniable that the changes Sin and Choe brought to the North Korean film industry were often limited, but their story of North Korea opens up the possibilities of discussing most crucial moments in the development of North Korean theater, film, and performance history and offers tales of misplacement in time and space, the place of the state patriarch in North Korean society, gender relations, and the everyday performance they were to display as model citizens of Kim Jong-il.