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Research hypothesis and aim of research

The author's principal research hypothesis may be summarized in the following multi-layered conception: First, the thesis emphasizes that the DPRK's imposed propaganda narratives (which the author defines as institutionalized myths) has played a crucial role in the long survival and persistent stability of the North Korean political system in the face of such massive external and economic shocks as the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the famine, and the international sanctions (p. 12). Second, the author stresses that films constituted a far more important vehicle of regime propaganda than written materials, such as *chuch'e* texts (pp. 10, 53). Third, the thesis emphasizes that the personality cult created around Kim Il Sung and his family occupied a central position in the regime's institutionalized myths, and played a crucial role in the political subjugation of the population, because the glorification of the leader was directly combined with the negation of the private self (p. 113). By examining the historical evolution of Kim Il Sung's cult in North Korea's movies, the author skillfully integrates the three themes into a single analytical framework. He seeks to describe the differences between the earlier and later manifestations of Kim's cult, and to identify the domestic and external factors that influenced the transformation of the cult. At the same time, the cinematic manifestations of North Korea's leadership cult are placed into the context of the evolution of North Korea's film industry, with particular respect to the foreign (Japanese and Soviet) models from which North Korean directors gained inspiration.

Originality (how innovative is this dissertation?)

The dissertation is undoubtedly highly innovative both in empirical and theoretical respects. The author simultaneously tackles three main themes: the history of North Korean cinema, the evolution of Kim Il Sung's personality cult, and the impact of foreign models on North Korean ideology and propaganda. By linking these themes with each other, he skillfully provides a novel insight into each sphere, and makes a major contribution to the academic literature in more than one respect. Instead of being solely a cinematographic, historical, or political science analysis, it is a successful synthesis of these fields, though the author is perceptibly more familiar with cultural history than with political history. Some of the observations made by the author are truly pioneering. For instance, he meticulously documents that the depiction of Kim Il Sung as a superhuman leader started relatively late, and the emergence of this image largely coincided with the creation of secondary cults around his various relatives. The strong emphasis that the leadership laid on the creation of these secondary cults is clearly demonstrated by the movie *Fire Burning All Over the World*, which was dedicated to Kim Hyŏng-kwŏn, Kim Il Sung's uncle, and which

showed Kim Il Sung only in a few scenes (pp. 114-115, 124-129). Thus, it appears likely that the post-1967 elevation of Kim Il Sung's cult to a level unparalleled in earlier North Korean history was strongly motivated by the need to justify the nepotistic promotion of his relatives, some of whom had never participated in the anti-Japanese struggle and whose nationalist legitimacy was thus weaker than that of the ex-guerrillas whom Kim purged in 1967-1969 (pp. 7, 99-102).

The author also deserves particular praise for his dispassionate analysis of the impact that pre-1945 Japanese cinema made on the style, themes, images, and techniques of early North Korean cinema. Instead of presenting this influence as evidence of the essentially non-Communist nature of the North Korean regime and thus adopting a polemical approach (as Brian Myers does), he meticulously documents that early North Korean movies may be regarded as an elaborate fusion of Japanese and Soviet techniques, rather than works in which only one model predominated, and the influence of the other model appeared only in a perfunctory form, if at all. The author adopts a more polemical attitude toward those academic views which presented North Korea's ideology and political system as a return to Korea's Neo-Confucian traditions (pp. 8-9, 25-26, 92, 110-112, 128), but, in my personal opinion, his criticism is fairly justified (for further information on the differences between Chosŏn Korea and the DPRK, see Balazs Szalontai, "The Evolution of the North Korean Socio-Political System, 1945-1994," in Adrian Buzo, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea* [2020], pp. 26-28).

Range, significance, and selection of topic of investigation /source material/corpus (how representative is the material analyzed?)

The thesis is solidly based on the most relevant primary sources, that is, the unedited versions of North Korean movies to which the author gained access in the Koryo Tours film library, the North Korean Resource Center, and the Korean Federation of Film Archives. Acutely aware of the fact that many North Korean movies were later extensively edited by the authorities (a practice overlooked by some earlier analysts; see p. 16), the author took care to unearth the original versions of the films he selected for examination. Indeed, several of the films analyzed by him had been partly or wholly overlooked in earlier studies on North Korean cinema (p. 13). Instead of a selective focus on a specific period of the Kim Il Sung era, the thesis meticulously follows the evolution of North Korean cinema from the beginning to the 1980s, thus skillfully avoiding the fallacy of extrapolation and correctly distinguishing between the successive stages in the development of North Korean cinema in general and that of the cinematic depiction of Kim Il Sung's cult in particular. For instance, the movies made in the first decade of the DPRK are accurately contrasted with the ones produced in the post-1967 era.

The sole potential chronological gap in his analysis is the scarcity of examined movies from 1962-1966 (a minor exception is *The Tale of Hŭngbu* on pp. 79, 97), a period that does not fully fit into any of the two main stages described above. In 1962-1964, North Korea was increasingly on a

collision course with Soviet de-Stalinization (which led to a growing emphasis on nationalism and *chuch'e* propaganda, and boosted Kim Il Sung's cult), then, in 1965-1966, the leadership managed to achieve a partial reconciliation with the USSR (which led to a growing emphasis on international cooperation and a temporary decline in Kim's cult). It would be interesting to see if these short-term political and ideological shifts made any perceptible impact on the movies made during these years, or the cinematic sphere remained largely unaffected by them.

Thanks to his extensive familiarity with North Korean movies and his ability to contextualize them, the author avoids the fairly common error of using the published speeches and brochures of Kim Jong Il as the theoretical starting point of his analysis. On pp. 108-110, he correctly points out that Kim Jong Il's so-called "seed theory" lacked any theoretical depth or practical value. He makes good use of the related literature (e.g., South Korean studies on North Korean cinema and Western analyses of Soviet socialist realism), but his thesis is by no means an eclectic synthesis of earlier publications. On the contrary, he is well aware of the limitations of some earlier academic and non-academic works, both Korean and non-Korean (pp. 16-21), and consciously seeks to fill the gaps he has identified in the literature.

Concerning the question of state-sanctioned nationalism in Soviet-controlled Communist regimes (pp. 45-49), the author may also consult Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism 1941–1953* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Dirk Spilker, *The East German Leadership and the Division of Germany: Patriotism and Propaganda 1945–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Yannis Sygkelos, *Nationalism from the Left: The Bulgarian Communist Party during the Second World War and the Early Post-War Years* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). On pre-1945 Korean Communist views on nationalism (p. 48), he may consult Vladimir Tikhonov, "Demystifying the Nation: The Communist Concept of Ethno-Nation in 1920s–1930s Korea," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 28. On the conflicts between North Korea and Mao's China (p. 90), the best secondary source is Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino–North Korean Relations, 1949–1976* (Ithaca: Columbia University Press, 2018). On the popularity of cinema in the DPRK (pp. 10, 58), the author may be interested in Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2009), Chapter 1.

Method/methodology (is the method adequate/effective?). Are the methods/concepts/theories/approaches appropriate?)

In general, the author's methods of investigation are sufficiently adequate and effective, and the theories he chose to contextualize his research theme are appropriate. The thesis is solidly based on a rich collection of empirical information, which enables the author to re-examine the correctness of earlier theories. Instead of criticizing the earlier theories (e.g., the views that

described North Korea's leadership cult as a political religion rooted in Korea's Confucian traditions) merely on the basis of alternative theories, he meticulously investigates whether these theories are compatible with the available facts. Skillfully avoiding the pitfalls of thesis-driven research, he does not force the available facts into any particular theoretical scheme, but he also steers clear of the opposite extreme, i.e., an excessively positivist approach.

The most serious deficiency of the thesis is a linguistic and stylistic one. While the author's command of English is sufficiently adequate to ensure comprehensibility, the text contains an unusually high number of typos, incomplete or inaccurate grammatical structures, and other minor errors, which sorely need to be corrected. See the following examples: "from the begging" (p. 6), "until late 1950s" (p. 6), "with the limited scope" (p. 14), "a part of Ministry of Unification" (p. 14), "it did not stop them from achieving the high level of population control" (p. 19; "population control" means demographic control, but the author evidently meant social control), "The ideological motivations of such a use" (p. 27), "that in 1905's article" (p. 41), "of the 1940s, and 1850s" (p. 43), "Korean Communist Party, supported by Moscow" (p. 44), "Niekricz" (p. 45; the author used the Polish spelling of a Russian name, Alexander Nekrich, in an English text), "NKWD" (p. 46; the author used the Polish spelling of a Russian abbreviation in an English text), "adopted" (p. 48), "tsars from Ukraine, Georgia or Belarus" (p. 49; inaccurate application of a Russian term to the other countries), "'Rodong Sinmun' was a response to 'Pravda,' and 'Külloja' to 'Kommunist'" (p. 50; the names of newspapers and journals should appear in italics, rather than in quotation marks), "The place of a leader in North Korean industry" (p. 50; presumably film industry), "Lunacharsky (1923, online)" (p. 51; missing from the bibliography), "was a dictator favorite movie" (p. 53), "Grate Leader" (p. 54), "Dear Leader cinephilia" (p. 55), "and city was filled with posters" (p. 56), "Unlikely there is a country" (p. 57), "and rich Film Museum where objects related to Kims are no lacking" (p. 57), "a melodrama about an for him ex-convict" (p. 64), "the first movie for which Kang was mentioned in a director crew" (p. 65), "mysticalization" (p. 81), "strengthened the power of a Kim, did not amplify the image of a leader in cinema" (p. 96), "The Kim Jong Il status changed again" (p. 99).

Scholarship (what is the level of methodological and theoretical reflection?)

This dissertation may definitely be regarded as an excellent academic work, both in the depth of its empirical analysis and in its theoretical significance. Instead of arbitrarily selecting a single theoretical model and applying it on his chosen theme as if it were a magic formula for analysis (a common approach in mediocre and non-innovative theses), the author adopted a comprehensive and holistic attitude toward the various theoretical views – an attitude that ultimately enabled him to critically re-examine some earlier theoretical models (e.g., the concept of socialist realism: pp. 35-45), and question their applicability to the DPRK. Two particularly interesting sub-themes are the expressions of nationalism in North Korean movies (pp. 69-70, 77-78, 119-120) and the question of whether one may apply the concept of religion (or political religion) to North Korea's

ideology (pp. 22-30). He concludes that the terms “myth,” “legend,” and “ritual” are more appropriate than “religion,” a view in which I am quite in agreement.

In one respect, however, the author’s observations may need to be refined to some extent. While it is true that the mythologization of Kim Il Sung (i.e., the depiction of the leader as a person endowed with supernatural abilities) was primarily a phenomenon of the post-1980 era, it is important to note that certain early foreign visitors (e.g., Anna Louise Strong and Tibor Méray) mentioned, evidently on the basis of the information they received from their North Korean hosts, that during the Manchurian guerrilla struggle, the local population and/or the Japanese authorities “spread legends about him: that he could fly, that he could contract the earth and step from one place to a distant one” (Anna Louise Strong, *In North Korea: First Eye-Witness Report*, 1949, p. 23). These claims were very different from the cults created around the East European Stalinist leaders, and it appears very reasonable to link them to the messianistic and millennial tendencies prevalent in pre-1945 Korean society (a phenomenon correctly emphasized by the author: pp. 75-76). One wonders whether the post-1980 references to the alleged supernatural abilities of Kim Il Sung and Kim Chŏng-suk (p. 128) were directly inspired by these early legends.

Structure of the dissertation (how convincing is the structure/approach?)

In general, the structure of the dissertation is adequate. The chapters are skillfully organized into sub-units (several of which are focused on the analysis of a single specific movie), textual and structural redundancy has been successfully avoided (though it may be advisable to shorten the long sections exclusively devoted to Soviet cultural policies: pp. 35-40, 51-53), and the author’s narrative smoothly progresses from the theoretical overview to the description of North Korean events and the examination of individual movies. The conclusion is sufficiently analytical, rather than a mere summary and recapitulation of the author’s earlier observations.

Style/Stringency of the argument. (Are the research questions and aims pursued in a stringent manner?)

In general, the author pursues his research questions and aims in a stringent manner. His research is solidly based on extensive and meticulous empirical research, as the movies selected for analysis are examined from multiple angles. The author skillfully observes even such small but highly significant details as the banner praising Soviet-Korean friendship in *Blast Furnace* (p. 81), corrects the erroneous conclusions drawn by earlier authors (pp. 67-68), reconstructs the pre- and post-1945 career of noted North Korean directors and actors (pp. 64-67), and carefully compares the selected North Korean films with their closest Soviet, Japanese, and Chinese analogies to ascertain whether the North Korean directors may have gained inspiration from the latter or not (pp. 61-64, 67-69, 85-86, 89-92, 105). His nuanced comparative analysis is particularly

praiseworthy. Instead of regarding the earlier academic interpretations (e.g., Gabroussenko's focus on the Soviet sources of North Korean art versus Myers' focus on the Japanese origins of North Korean ideology and culture) as mutually exclusive models, and expressing a categorical preference for one interpretation over another, he manages to integrate them into a thoughtful synthesis, readily acknowledges the valid observations of each model, but neither absolutizes nor uncritically adopts any of them (pp. 44-45). This holistic approach is a creative and valuable contribution to the relevant literature (which has been adversely affected by the splits among the various scholars), and as such, it deserves strong support. There are only a few cases when the author's observations need to be corrected or refined:

P.85: "The conflict itself is not presented as a civil war between Koreans ... Rather, it is shown as a war led by Koreans against the foreign invader, reduced to the USA. ... The relationship between Koreans and Americans is vertical, the former nation is presented as subordinate to the latter. This perspective was heavily influenced by KAPF writers who dominated the literary scene at the time." Actually, this narrative of the war was adopted throughout the Soviet bloc, and thus it should not be attributed to the influence of the former KAPF writers. For instance, on 22 August 1950 Soviet UN representative Yakov Malik described the war as an all-national liberation struggle against the United States. At the same time, Soviet bloc definitions of the war were by no means fixed. On 3 August 1950 (i.e., less than three weeks earlier), Malik had attempted to question the legitimacy of the UN intervention on behalf of the ROK by emphatically presenting the Korean War as a civil war, rather than an inter-state conflict.

P.94: "Kim Il Sung located in the middle is accompanied by Mao, and strangely, not Nikita Khrushchev a First Secretary of the Communist Party, but Nikolai Bulganin, who at the time of making the movie held the position of Premier. Bulganin may have been elected for the prosaic reason of his personal meeting with the Great Leader in Khabarovsk and North Korea's distrust of the Kremlin's new policy." This conclusion is erroneous, because in this period, other Communist countries also displayed the picture of Bulganin, rather than Khrushchev, in certain situations. For instance, in September 1955 a visiting East German government delegation was greeted in Berlin with the pictures of GDR President Wilhelm Pieck, Soviet Premier Bulganin, and GDR Premier Otto Grotewohl.

Pp.99-104: The author's narrative of the complex events of 1967-1976 shows some tendencies of retrospective simplification, as he attributes the post-1967 purges and the expansion of Kim Il Sung's cult near-exclusively to the growing influence of Kim Jong Il. Actually, in the mid-and late 1960s Kim Yŏngju's influence was probably considerably greater than that of Kim Jong Il, and the purges of 1967-69 were triggered by a combination of factors, such as disputes over North Korea's strategy toward South Korea (see Balazs Szalontai, "The Evolution of the North Korean Socio-Political System, 1945-1994," pp. 28-31). Due to the post-1974 disappearance of Kim Yongju from the political scene and the growing cult of Kim Jong Il, subsequent North Korean narratives retrospectively exaggerated his direct role in the earlier events, much in the same way as they had over-emphasized Kim Il Sung's role at the expense of the other Manchurian guerrillas.

P.140: “During the process, the classical narrations known from the socialist realism were finally removed. The classic form of the communist government’s triangle of Party – Leader– People was no longer relevant. In the discussed movies, the mythologized leader is beyond it.” Actually, a Kim Jong Il speech titled “On Establishing the Juche Outlook on the Revolution” and dated 10 October 1987 (i.e., the very period mentioned by the author) still explicitly upholds this triangular conception: “Just as the leader, the party, and the masses constitute the subject of the revolution by forming a socio-political organism, so the outlooks on the leader, the organization, the masses, and morals constitute an integral outlook on the revolution in an unbreakable relationship.” Thus, the shift observed by the author did not necessarily indicate that this triangular form was no longer relevant in North Korean ideology and propaganda as such, even if this shift did occur in the specific sphere of movies.

Conclusion (how convincing is the confirmation/refutation of the research hypothesis?) Are the results accurate and convincing? Do they constitute an innovative contribution to scholarship in the field? Do they indicate/open up fields for further research?

The conclusions that the author reaches on the basis of his empirical findings may be regarded as fully convincing and justified. They do confirm the author’s research hypothesis, and constitute an innovative contribution to scholarship in the field, primarily in North Korean studies but also in the field of Communism studies and cinematographic studies. It would be definitely worth extending the author’s analysis to some additional films depicting Kim Il Sung, examining the cinematic evolution of Kim Jong Il’s cult along similar lines, and comparing the two cults with each other. The author might also compare the cinematic expressions of Kim Il Sung’s cult with that of Stalin or Boleslaw Bierut, or join forces with some specialists of North Korean literature and painting to investigate whether the stages, tendencies, and patterns he identified in the sphere of movies simultaneously appeared in the latter forms of fine arts, too, or the various spheres functioned at least partly autonomously from each other.

Seoul, 4 March 2023

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