

“Disruption, Taint, Redemption”: Violence & the North Korean Child  
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Introduction

From the foundation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), North Korean children’s culture has been intensely state authored, its texts, rituals, policies and practices structured to generate cohesion within the imagined community of Kim Il-sung. In contrast to contemporary Western models of personal development, North Korean childhood is perceived, not as a protected *pre*-political phase in individual human growth, but a foundational stage in the construction of revolutionary consciousness, fostering national cohesion, ideological purity, and reverence for Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un.

Through the prism of North Korean children’s culture, this paper explores representations of colonial violence against the child, particularly during the Japanese occupation and Korean War. The Sinchon Massacre has become the central image of colonial violence inflicted upon the bodies of the young, ritually reprised in the imaginations of children. Attention will be paid to depictions of violence in children’s literature, from fables to graphic novels, the taint of colonial violence constituting a glitch on the path to socialist modernity, delaying the final triumph of revolution, and reunification of the Korean Peninsula under the banner of socialism. Equally importantly, the paper will explore ways children’s culture seeks to overcome the taint of colonial violence, promising victory at the barrel of a gun. Attention will be paid to the Korean Children’s Union, its ritual structure playing a principal role in the maintenance of a national state of emergency. The role of military games will be considered, along with the depiction of redemptive violence in children’s literature.

Finally, the paper will reflect upon the post-Famine erosion of North Korea’s ideational hegemony, asking how today’s children might engage with narratives, written today, yet burdened with antiquated titles such as *Illustrated Reminiscences by the Anti-Japanese Guerrillas: We Are Not To Stop Our Struggle Any Time and Anywhere*. State media warns that the spread of foreign culture constitutes an insidious new form of colonial violence against young minds, yet this seems to be a losing battle, as a new generation rises, seeking redemption not through the barrel of a gun, but in material wealth, markets, and a rapidly changing media environment.

Disruption & Taint: Massacre of the Innocents

As King Herod’s “Massacre of the Innocents” in the New Testament became the defining image of imperial cruelty to the child in Western art and literature, so the Sinchon Massacre has become the central trope of North Korean depictions of colonial violence inflicted upon the bodies of the young. Through graphic representations of the massacre, especially in Sinchon itself, and its Museum of American Crimes, an historically contentious account of this Korean War atrocity is ritually reprised in the imaginations of North Korean children. In a typical poster, emblazoned with the slogan, “Let’s not forget the grudge over Sinchon!” set against a blood-red background, a martyred woman, beaten and bound with ropes, stands defiantly alongside her weeping children, clinging to her as her gaze rebukes the invader.<sup>1</sup> In the foreground a GI watches with vindictive glee, four children burning alive, screaming as flames engulf them. As the woman’s gaze pierces the imagined Yankee, so the central child stares from the flames into the eyes of the spectator, exhorting us to remember him, to avenge his death. It is a blood-curdling image, and stands as a warning, reminding the spectator the Americans still occupying the south are yearning for more Korean blood. It warns that war

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<sup>1</sup> David Heather & Koen De Ceuster, *North Korean Posters: The David Heather Collection* (Munich: Prestel, 2008), 104.

might resume any moment. Today's children are thus taught to consider themselves safe only shielded under the wings of state, and the leadership of Kim Il-sung and heirs.

In such propaganda, Americans commit atrocities with the sadism of devils in the art of Hieronymus Bosch, or the demons of Buddhist iconography, their deeds neither contextualised within the heat of battle, nor fog of war, assuming instead the heightened quality of nightmares, children stalked and devoured by an unrelenting foe, rising to almost supernatural evil. In one poster, marked by the text: "Do not forget the US imperialist wolves!" a monstrous American waves an infant over a well, his face coiled in rictus, as another soldier pushes back her terrified mother, forced to watch the murder.<sup>2</sup> As Sonia Ryang explains:

Ever since the Korean War, North Korea has referred to the United States with the mandatory suffix *nom* [놈] ... a derogatory term denoting worthlessness and baseness. But if the term *nom* borders on implying a marginal form of humanity, more explicit is the phrase 'US imperialist wolves' ... which literally banishes the American from the human race as a whole ... [and] consigns the United States to the level of carnivore animality ... by the time a North Korean is old enough to speak, these terms have been adopted as part of his / her everyday discourse, extinguishing any concept of Americans as possessing an even remotely human side.<sup>3</sup>

The most famous literary example of the "carnivore animality" is in Han Sorya's novella *Jackals*, American missionaries murdering a Korean child with an injection of bacillae. Written in 1951, at the height of the Korean War, there is, perhaps, a temptation to dismiss *Jackals* as a relic of an era of national emergency. Yet as Brian Myers discovered, "in August [2003], with the first round of the Six-Party Talks about to convene in Beijing, *Jackals* ... re-appeared simultaneously in three monthly magazines, complete with drawings of sunken-eyed, hook-nosed Yankees."<sup>4</sup> Myers considers *Jackals*, "the [North Korean] Text's main anti-American tale," even now.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, then, that North Koreans recall childhoods haunted by nightmares of America. As one recalls, "when I was little, I thought that Americans really were very frightening. And when I had nightmares, they were always about me ... [I was] running for my life from American soldiers who were chasing me with guns! I ended up dreaming these nightmares so often that I could only sleep with the candles lit. That's how bad it was."<sup>6</sup> Another recalls that, "in my dreams, I saw myself repelling the enemy, defeating him ... being hailed as a hero in Pyongyang by the Great Leader himself."<sup>7</sup> Of course, as Kim Suk-young recalls, a generation earlier South Korean children were also taught to dream of an infernal foe, recalling:

I sat curled up in a dark corner of our school movie theatre, waiting in horror for the animation film to be over. On screen was a grinning red monster with horns sticking out of his head and sharp menacing teeth like knife blades. The raging creature was destroying buildings and cars at will as he marched down the streets of Seoul ... the evil and merciless red monsters was the first image of North Korea that had ever been

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Enquiry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Jae-young, "I Used To Have Nightmares About Americans," *NKNews.org*, 22 March 2013. <http://www.nknews.org/2013/03/i-used-to-have-nightmares-about-americans/>.

<sup>7</sup> Kang Hyok, *This Is Paradise! My North Korean Childhood* (London: Abacus, 2007), 85.

presented to me ... films like this left a lingering effect on an impressionable preteen like me.<sup>8</sup>

South Korean activist and author Nam Chong-hyon critiqued the anti-communism of the Park Chung-hee era for its “racializing/primitivizing ... of the communist other.”<sup>9</sup> Today, however, the “othering” of the North in the South Korean imagination has largely evolved / dissolved into erasure. Yet for the children of the North, the past is no mere prologue, but never really past. The Museum of American Crimes in Sinchon County has thus become record, shrine and theatre, ritually reprising the massacre in wall-to-wall patterns of colonial violence. Indeed, the Museum has become a place of annual pilgrimage for Korean children, smiling youths in the red-scarves of the Children’s Union photographed outside, eager to learn the history of the place. In a booklet entitled *Sinchon Museum*, Pyongyang presents its version of the story:

Sinchon County in South Hwanghae Province is a place where the US imperialists and their stooges committed the atrocities of mass murder while the Korean People’s Army was carrying out a strategic temporary retreat during the Korean war ... During their occupation of Sinchon for 52 days (October 17 – December 7, 1950) the US aggressors slaughtered 35,383 people, a quarter of the total population of the county. The Sinchon Museum indicts to the whole world the bestial atrocities by the cutthroats ... The US imperialist aggressors arrested and killed people at random, irrespective of the old and young in Sinchon. They locked up over 900 innocent people in the air-raid shelter of the former Sinchon County Party Committee (now the Sinchon Museum) and burned them to death. They herded more than 520 inhabitants into the air-raid shelter of the former Sinchon County Militia Station, blocked its entrance and blew it up with a pre-installed explosive to murder them all ... The aggressors locked up 102 children and 400 mothers in two powder magazines in Wonam-ri and poured gasoline over them and set fire to them ... The Korean people never forget the brutal atrocities committed by the US imperialists and are full of a firm determination to revenge upon them a hundred and thousand fold if they invade Korea again.<sup>10</sup>

Like much North Korean historiography, the Museum reveals more about the politics and ideology of the DPRK, and its manipulation of images of childhood in particular, than it does about what took place in Sinchon. As early as 1951, Kim Il-sung had repudiated historically accurate depictions of the war, arguing that, “reproduction of the enemy’s atrocities does not in itself mean realistic art, nor do works of this sort always invoke hostility against the enemy,” lamenting that “naturalistic technique still finds glaring expression in the works of our writers and artists.”<sup>11</sup> Ensuing generations of artists and writers have hewn more closely to Kim Il-sung’s preference for symbol over facts. The Massacre, as presented in the Museum of American Crimes is a fundamentally fictional construct. As Myers writes, “the massacre of tens of thousands of civilians in Sinchon in October 1950 (which was actually perpetrated by Korean rightists) is held up as the Yankees’ most heinous crime ... [yet] the killings had taken place just before the arrival of American troops.”<sup>12</sup> Bruce Cumings wrote that he, “came away convinced that a terrible atrocity had taken place, although the evidence on its

<sup>8</sup> Kim Suk-young, *Illusive Utopia: Theatre, Film & Everyday Performance In North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), vii.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom’s Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Sinchon Museum* (Pyongyang: Korea Pictorial, 1989), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Kim Il-sung, “On Some Questions of Our Literature & Art: Talk With Writers & Artists,” 20 June 1951. In Kim Il-sung, *Works Volume 1* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publications House, 1976), 309.

<sup>12</sup> Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 136.

authorship was impossible to document.” He concluded that, “Christians from the South had returned to Sinchon during the UN occupation and presided over this appalling massacre. They and assorted right-wing youth groups murdered upward of 35,000 people ... The North Koreans preferred to blame this bestiality on Americans, following their core assumption that nothing transpires in South Korea without American orders.”<sup>13</sup>

And what of the effect of the Museum on the minds of children? A war orphan himself, Kim Yong recalls his encounters with the place as a child:

The museum was a solemn place commemorating the victims of the atrocities committed by the American army during the Korean War. But more importantly, it was a place where we were reminded why we should hate America. The museum displayed the American commander’s words directing the massacre. I visited the site so many times, even into my middle school days on school excursions, that I still remember every single line of the enemy commander’s order: ‘My command is law. Kill everyone mercilessly, young or old. Your hands should not tremble.’ We were told that the American soldiers had separated children from mothers and burned them separately in ammunition storage facilities up the mountain. We were brought into a mausoleum and shown the walls where the victims’ nails were embedded as they desperately gasped their last and wrote on the wall: ‘Avenge our death,’ and ‘Americans are our arch-enemies’ ... I shuddered at the sight. Everyone felt that if it weren’t for our Great Father Kim Il-sung’s courageous leadership, all of us would still be under the yoke of foreign domination. We all felt that the intense hatred for Americans soon transformed into equally intense love for our father. Our hearts and minds welled up with admiration for he who presided over the safety and dignity of our homeland.<sup>14</sup>

That was during the 1960s. When I visited the Museum in 2011, I saw the same images, heard the same tales, visited the same hallowed place where the children scratched messages of vengeance into the walls with their nails, and read the orders of the bestial American commander. Now, as then, children who pass through the Museum are called to see themselves in the images, to imagine their own flesh burning in the ammo dump, and to praise Kim Il-sung, re-consecrating body and soul to the revolutionary state that would defend them.

If Sinchon was defined by the intimate personalised evil of GIs, then other atrocities reflect the cruelty of the wider bombing campaign. One image depicts a wailing child, clinging to the corpse of her mother lying in the rubble of a burned-out city. Almost forty bombs, marked “US”, rain down where a sole infant lies screaming. The city is already a cinder and there are no other signs of life, so the message is clear: the cruelty and vindictiveness of the United States extends to the carpet-bombing of a last surviving child. The poster thus argues such campaigns were not indiscriminate, but entirely discriminate, in that the very intention of the war was the extermination of the North Korean people.<sup>15</sup> A similar poster depicts a bleeding child, staggering away from her burning home, as her younger sibling seeks to rouse the corpse of her mother. With the immediacy of a photograph, it captures the devastation of war, and the vulnerability of the child, accompanied by the text: “Let’s not forget the savage cruelty of the US imperialist wolves!”<sup>16</sup> In another, three children weep, engulfed in flames, one girl visible only for her pigtails, smoke shrouding her face, whilst the text exclaims: “Let’s not forget the blood-drenched hatred!” the letters U.S.A.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Random House, 2010), 198-199.

<sup>14</sup> Kim Yong, *Long Road Home: Testimony of a North Korean Camp Survivor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 22.

<sup>15</sup> De Ceuster, *North Korean Posters*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

marked in the foreground.<sup>17</sup> In each of these posters, the past folds into the present, and thus into an imagined future, exhorting the viewer to neither forget the fear and bloodshed of war, nor to forget they might recur at any moment. The disruption and taint of colonial violence is written on the bodies of the child.

#### Disruption & Taint: Violence in Children's Literature

At the height of the Korean War, Kim Il-sung exhorted writers to become, “engineers of the human soul,”<sup>18</sup> and to this day, as North Korean author Jang Jin-sung explains, “every single writer in North Korea produces works according to a chain of command that begins with the Writers' Union Central Committee of the Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department ... literature thus plays a central role not only in North Korean arts but also in the social structure of the country.”<sup>19</sup> Prescribing rules for authors of children's books, Kim Jong-il asserted in his treatise *On Juche Literature* that, “personification is advantageous for satirizing the enemy's life and for showing the present life of our people figuratively and in an interesting way.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, even the simplest fables for children parallel the state's geopolitical predicament. A trite zoological morality play, *Butterfly and Cock* depicts a large “bad-tempered” rooster, bullying its neighbours, yet outwitted by a virtuous butterfly, in an unsubtle analogy for the DPRK's existential struggle with the United States of America.<sup>21</sup> *A Winged Horse* tells the story of an idyllic coastal village, attacked by marauding samurai, recalling both the Imjin Wars and the later era of Japanese colonisation. Meanwhile, the villains in *Boys Wipe Out Bandits* are not foreigners, but reactionaries and capitalists, their violence a disruption of the redemptive processes of revolution.<sup>22</sup> In books for older readers, anti-Americanism typically centres on the Korean War. *Dean Captured*, for instance, celebrates the capture of Major General William F. Dean in 1950, whilst others feature implausible feats of daring, often by youth in the tumult of war.<sup>23</sup> As in the tableaux at the Museum of American Crimes, the imperialists are depicted as infernal foes, “radical and racial Others,”<sup>24</sup> as described by Martin Petersen in his study of North Korean graphic novels.

Despite the violence of children's literature set during the Korean War, such tales also depict this era as one of personal, geographical and political liminality. As Ryang writes, “in a paradoxical way, the Korean Peninsula during the Korean War may be understood as a time-space of adventure and excitement as well.” She notes that the “kinds of human flow” permitted in wartime “became much rarer for later generations ... as Party control over domestic travel, school placement, and office assignment steadily increased, creating the unitary, immobile society we know today.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, we should not be too surprised children enjoy such tales, not only for the cathartic eruption of redemptive violence against the imperialist foe, but for the chaotic fluidity of their narrative environment, a kind of Korean Wild West, in which the unexpected becomes possible. As the other legitimising myth of revolution, the anti-Japanese guerilla struggle also remains a key subject, depicted in books with titles such as *Take This Rifle, Comrades!*<sup>26</sup>, *Unending Confrontation*<sup>27</sup> and *The Japs*

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, *North Korean Posters*, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Kim Il-sung, “On Some Questions of Our Literature & Art: Talk With Writers & Artists,” 20 June 1951. In Kim Il-sung, *Works Volume 1* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publications House, 1976), 305.

<sup>19</sup> Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader* (London: Rider Books, 2014), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Kim Jong-il, *On Juche Literature* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1992), 219.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Yong-sam, *Butterfly & Cock* (Kum Song Youth Publishing House, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Kim Jong-il, *Boys Wipe Out Bandits* (Pyongyang: Kum Song Youth Publishing House, 1989), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Choe Hong-sik, *Dean Captured* (Pyongyang: Art & Literature Publishing House, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Martin Petersen, “Patriots behind Enemy Lines: Hyperreality & the Stories of Self and Other in Recent North Korean War-Theme Graphic Novels,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013), 383.

<sup>25</sup> Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> Kim Sang-bok, *Take This Rifle, Comrades* (Pyongyang: Pyongyang: Kum Song Youth Publishing House, 2005).

*Punished*.<sup>28</sup> The cumulative effect of such literature is to conjure a transcendental national mythology, binding today's children to the historical experience of their revolutionary antecedents.<sup>29</sup> Children are invited into the mythopoeic landscape of the national imagination, both as victims, and – as we shall see – as victors too.

#### Redemption: “To Die Would Be An Awfully Big Adventure”

Thus far we have explored depictions of violence *against* the revolution, and children in particular. As disruption and taint, such violence is perceived an impediment to reunification and the final victory of socialism on the Korean Peninsula. However, there is an equally strong current of violence *against* the Japanese and American imperialists in the children's culture of the DPRK, young people tasked with the challenge of becoming agents of victory against imperialism. It is to an exploration of such violence this paper now turns.

Whilst the childhood hagiographies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are the preeminent texts for the moral and political instruction of North Korean children,<sup>30</sup> Pyongyang has produced a supporting cast of heroes to accompany its principle protagonists. One such revolutionary saint was Kim Kum-sun, a member of the Anti-Japanese Children's Corps, martyred in 1934 at the tender age of nine. As state media recalls, “the guerillas and inhabitants of the guerilla base loved this little girl so much, and President Kim Il-sung praised her as a wit. She pepped up the guerrillas and people in the battle to defend Xiaowangqing guerilla base and other fights against the Japanese imperialists by shouting revolutionary slogans and singing militant songs together with other members of the Children's Corps.”<sup>31</sup> The ideal child, Kim is creative and spontaneous, “a wit,” yet committed to collective aspirations, using her gifts not for self-aggrandizement or pleasure, but the edification and morale of the guerrillas. Notably, at no stage is her gender queried – nor even emphasized – demonstrating the revolution's ostensible commitment to socialist principles of gender equality. In Kim Il-sung's Korea, even a nine-year-old girl may become a hero.

Tragically, however, Kim is captured running messages behind enemy lines. Surviving threats and torture, she is ultimately executed by Japanese police, refusing to betray the secrets of resistance. The state thus draws a line from Kim Kum-sun to the children of the Korean War, and to the children of contemporary North Korea. Outside the Kim Kum-sun Secondary School in Sinuiju stands a statue of the wit that so inspired the Great Leader, and across the DPRK, “today millions of KCU [Korean Children's Union] members prepare themselves to be juvenile heroes like Kim Kum Sun and pillars of thriving Korea under the loving care of the dear respected Kim Jong-un.” Even now, children are expected to be ready “to die for the leader” (결사옹위). In July 2012, for example, a Secondary School in South Hamgyong Province was renamed Han Hyon-gyong School,<sup>32</sup> in honor of a child, who “protected portraits of the three commanders of Mt. Paektu at the cost of her life at a critical moment when her house was on the verge of collapse due to a landslide caused by a heavy rain.” Even the symbols of the state are honored at the price of young lives. Reflecting on

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<sup>27</sup> Jun In-kwang, *Unending Confrontation* (Pyongyang: Kum Song Youth Publishing House, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Kim Sang-bok, *The Japs Punished* (Pyongyang: Pyongyang: Kum Song Youth Publishing House, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Martin Petersen, “Patriots behind Enemy Lines: Hyperreality and the Stories of Self and Other in Recent North Korean War-Theme Graphic Novels,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013), 379.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Richardson, “Hagiography of the Kims & the Childhood of Saints: Kim Jong-il,” *Sino-NK*, 12 August 2014. <http://sinonk.com/2014/08/12/hagiography-of-the-kims-and-the-childhood-of-saints-kim-jong-il/>

<sup>31</sup> KCNA, “Kim Kum Sun, 9-Year-Old Hero of Korea,” *KCNA* (Pyongyang), 26 June 2012. <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201206/news26/20120626-27ee.html>

<sup>32</sup> KCNA, “DPRK Inphung Secondary School Renamed Han Hyon Gyong Secondary School,” *KCNA* (Pyongyang), 17 July 2012. <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201207/news17/20120717-18ee.html>

Han Hyon-gyong's martyrdom, Kim Jong-un was said to remark, "the noble spirit displayed by Han Hyon-gyong would always live on and help the country produce more excellent young people."<sup>33</sup> This is, perhaps, the ultimate reward for the North Korean child. As Ryang writes, "death that occurs while dedicating oneself to the Great Leader or *suryeong* is ... equivalent to eternal life."<sup>34</sup>

### *Be Prepared!:* The Korean Children's Union

The Korean Children's Union (조선소년단) was founded in 1946 along lines similar to the Young Pioneer movement elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, combining the civic-minded wholesomeness of Robert Baden-Powell's scouting movement, with the military-first (*Songun*) ideology of the North Korean state.<sup>35</sup> The Children's Union and the scouting movement even share the same motto, "Be Prepared!" Yet after the initial publication of *Scouting For Boys*, Baden-Powell's exhortation that children, "be prepared to die for your country," would be excised from the text, reflecting the waning militarism in British society after the traumas of the Great War. In the DPRK, however, time has not diminished the self-sacrificial militarism of the Children's Union, playing a principle role in the maintenance of a perpetual state of emergency, waxing and waning according to political exigencies, whilst producing generations of new Kim Kum-suns and Han Hyon-gyongs.

In the West, nationalistic and military children's culture surged during the world wars,<sup>36</sup> yet as Ryang writes, for those "generations of North Koreans born and raised after 1953, the war has been less a memory than a cultural construction."<sup>37</sup> Christine Hong has argued that the conclusion of the Korean War with an Armistice, not a Peace Treaty, along with annual military exercises between the United States and South Korea, legitimize, even justify, such militarism.<sup>38</sup> Yet the all-encompassing nature of North Korean war culture vastly exceeds the instrumental demands of national self-defense, and has evolved into the organizing principle of its entire social system. Seeking to repel the taint of colonial violence, young members of the Union pledge to "turn out as human bullets and bombs,"<sup>39</sup> and on June 3 2013, *Rodong Sinmun* reported members of the Union in Hamhung had even "donated multiple launch rocket systems" to the Korean People's Army (KPA), as an example of its long tradition of "Do Good" activities.<sup>40</sup> There is irony here, of course, Myers reminding us the expressions "human bullet" and "human bomb" (육탄) are inherited from the vocabulary of Imperial Japan.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>33</sup> KCNA, "Kim Jong-un Sends Autographs to Officials, Workers & Children in Pyongyang," *KCNA* (Pyongyang), 29 June 2012. <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201206/news29/20120629-13ee.html>

<sup>34</sup> Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 35.

<sup>35</sup> Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 201-4.

<sup>36</sup> See for example: Ross F. Collins, "This Is Your Propaganda, Kids: Building a War Myth for World War I Children," *Journalism History* 38, no. 1. (2012): 13-22. See also: Bob Bessant, "The Experience of Patriotism and Propaganda for Children in Australian Elementary Schools Before the Great War," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 31, no. 1 (1995): 83-102.

<sup>37</sup> Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Christine Hong, "The Mirror of North Korean Human Rights," *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2013): 578-579.

<sup>39</sup> KCNA, "Korean Youth, Children Denounce Lee Myung Bak Regime's Malignant Outbursts," *KCNA* (Pyongyang), 5 June 2012, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201206/news05/20120605-22ee.html>

<sup>40</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, "KCU Members Donate Multiple Launch Rocket Systems to KPA," *Rodong Sinmun* (Pyongyang), 3 June 2012.

[http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2013-06-03-0002&chAction=T](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2013-06-03-0002&chAction=T)

<sup>41</sup> Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 125.

One of the central features of life in the Union are various types of military games. In the 1983 novel *Sunshine Forever*, set in the aftermath of the Korean War, Kim Il-sung encounters a group of children, dismembering a snowman carved in the image of a GI. The children boast of how many “Yankee bastards” they have killed.<sup>42</sup> The tradition of building Snow Yankees has become a winter ritual, the cheapest and simplest of many such games (군사놀이) popular with North Korean children. In a Chongjin kindergarten, for instance, hangs a painting of four children assaulting snowmen in hats. On the body of one beak-nosed and cross-eyed snowman is the inscription, “Yankee bastard!” On the other the inscription, “Rat Myung-bak,” a pun on the Korean word for rat (쥐) and President Lee Myung-baks’s family name (O).<sup>43</sup> Some games leave little to the imagination, such as an installation I witnessed in the Pyongyang Central Zoo in 2012. Whereas a similar game in the funfairs of myriad cultures might entail throwing a ball through the mouth of a clown or lion, the object of this game was distinctly North Korean, the child scoring a prize by throwing a ball through the gaping skull of an American soldier. The GI was a repellent caricature, with hooked nose, filthy locks, orange skin and dislocated teeth. His face expresses terror, and his eyes drip tears. In the side of his head, a hole weeps brains and blood, and it is into this cavity the child pelts a projectile in pursuit of a prize. The only English text are the letters ‘USA’ emblazoned on the GI’s helmet, whilst the Korean superscript reads: “Destroy the American invaders, the North Korean people’s sworn enemy!”<sup>44</sup> The features of the Yankee recollect the revolutionary phrenology of Han Sorya in his essay *Idiot Contest*, touting “his theory that the faces of Americans ... manifest an inner ‘idiotization,’” their wicked natures revealed in flesh.<sup>45</sup> Or, as Barbara Demick writes, describing similar imagery in children’s school readers, Americans are “drawn with beakish noses like the Jews in anti-Semitic cartoons of Nazi Germany.”<sup>46</sup> Similar games have been installed at the Kaeson Kindergarten in Pyongyang, depicting American and Japanese soldiers alike,<sup>47</sup> and on International Children’s Day in 2014, the Associated Press captured images of children launching arrows at images of President Obama, and President Park Geun-hye.<sup>48</sup>

Such games have a long history, emerging as early as the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle. In Han Sorya’s novel *History*, Kim Il-sung instructs children to fantasise about bayonetting their colonial nemeses, explaining that, “with every step you must feel you are stepping on a Jap’s skull.”<sup>49</sup> Even earlier, in Han’s *Mangyongdae*, a teenaged Kim Il-sung devises a game to play at his Manchurian middle school. Entitled “Catch the Jap,” as Myers relates, “the General ‘develops’ the game by fitting out the ‘Jap’ in spectacles and buck teeth to add realism.”<sup>50</sup> More recently, as children in the West play “Cops and Robbers,” or the

<sup>42</sup> Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 50-54.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Ferriss III, “Imperialist snowmen? Painting at the kindergarten in Chongjin, North Korea,” *Instagram*, April 2012. [http://instagram.com/p/Yth\\_-aFr1G/#](http://instagram.com/p/Yth_-aFr1G/#)

<sup>44</sup> Author Photo.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Myers, *Han Sorya & North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Series, 1994), 122-123.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives of North Koreans* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), 121.

<sup>47</sup> David Guttenfelder, “Caricatures of American and Japanese soldiers are stored in a room at Kaeson Kindergarten in Pyongyang. Children throw things at the faces and pretend to shoot or bayonet them with toy guns during a schoolyard game,” *Instagram*, March 2013. <http://instagram.com/p/Wny01qAwyG/#>

<sup>48</sup> Joshua Freedom du Lac, “In North Korea, a young girl takes aim at a picture of President Obama,” *Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), 2 June 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/06/02/in-north-korea-a-young-girl-takes-aim-at-a-picture-of-president-obama/>

<sup>49</sup> Myers, *Han Sorya and North Korean Literature*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

racially problematic “Cowboys and Indians,” Kang Hyok recalls playing “Korean War” in the mines of Onsong during the 1990s. He explains: “we divided up into two ‘armies,’ the ‘bastard imperialist Americans’ on one side (the weakest among us were always chosen for that role) and the stout North Korean soldiers on the other. We plunged into the black holes, not carrying any torches or anything ... we were in total darkness, whispering to one another, ambushing our enemies, plotting surprise attacks.”<sup>51</sup> The revolutionary state thus inhabits the imaginations of its citizens from childhood, teaching games that all must play.

### Redemptive Violence in Literature & Television

Myers distinguishes revolutionary literature in the DPRK from the Leninist socialist realism of the Soviet Union, in which “the spontaneity of the masses operates as a retrograde and dangerous force *unless infused from without with political consciousness.*” Korean writers, on the other hand, “saw the way to overcome injustice not in *tempering* the spontaneity of the Korean people ... but in *unleashing* it, in allowing it to erupt with a purging force.”<sup>52</sup> Returning to the children’s stories introduced earlier, how is this purging force unleashed, overcoming the taint of colonial violence? In *Boys Wipe Out Bandits* cultural impurities, capitalist degeneracy, and rampant individualism are defeated by the virtues of the collective, erupting in a cathartic wave of revolutionary force. One villain is “blown high up in the air ... his waist was broken.”<sup>53</sup> Another is killed with knives and arrows and “collapsed, giving a scream.”<sup>54</sup> Each act of violence, it should be noted, committed by children. One youth bursts the cysts on the shoulders of the bandit captain, as the villagers, inspired by his bravery, complete the liberation of their home from the bandits. And as for the villains in *A Winged Horse?* When the child hero redeems his fallen village, astride the eponymous *chollima*, the Japanese are depicted, “screaming with fright ... the villagers cut down the fleeing enemy with arrows and spears.”<sup>55</sup> The Japanese are cut down as they run, buck-toothed and cross-eyed, helmets flying from their heads as their lifeless bodies tumble.

Similar lessons are found in North Korean children’s television. One cartoon widely seen internationally due to its distribution via *Youtube* is entitled “Pencil Artillery Shells”.<sup>56</sup> This revolutionary *Merrie Melodie* depicts a young boy struggling to complete his homework. Falling asleep at his desk, he imagines a Yankee invasion. Ultimately, the boy realises that only through study and hard work at school will it be possible to protect the revolution from the taint of imperialist violence, as with his protractor, compass and pencils, he defeats the invasion. As Tatiana Gabroussenko writes, “unlike in South Korea, where the same imperative [to study] is justified by intellectual fun and social success ... the North Korean educational paradigm suggests another lucrative objective: good students are better prepared for the defence of their country against invaders.”<sup>57</sup> Yet as we shall see, there are paradoxes in the DPRK’s call to personal and national redemption, suggesting such victories will, and must, forever remain beyond grasp.

### To Victory?

It is a fundamental axiom of the North Korean imagination that the United States of America remains the eternal foe of the Korean people. Indeed, it could not be otherwise, if the state and social system are to endure as presently constituted. Sonia Ryang writes that, “North

<sup>51</sup> Kang Hyok, *This Is Paradise!*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> Myers, *Han Sorya & North Korean Literature*, 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> Kim Jong-il, *Boys Wipe Out Bandits*, 32.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Kim Il-sung, *A Winged Horse*, 56-57.

<sup>56</sup> “Pencil Artillery Shells” (연필포탄), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujtp-70zOME>

<sup>57</sup> Tatiana Gabroussenko, “North Korea: A Culture of Warriors,” *Asia Times* (Bangkok), 22 July 2012. <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NL22Dg02.html>

Korea's ontological foundations are so deeply connected with the logic of the national emergency that it has become difficult for North Koreans to imagine life without emergency, without the national enemy."<sup>58</sup> Perversely, therefore, the state must remain forever poised at the moment of final victory. As Myers notes, "America is too important a scapegoat for the regime ever to claim to have defeated it once and for all. To do so would be to raise public expectations of a drastic improvement in living standards, the immediate reunification of the peninsula, and everything else that Washington is now accused of preventing."<sup>59</sup> The American imperialists are therefore doomed to remain the eternal foe in North Korea's revolutionary demonology. Reunification rhetoric should be seen for what it is, a North Korean eschatology, or a kind of secular millenarianism. Although in such eschatology there is a rich imagery of what this transcendental event will entail, there is little detail about *how* it might take place, or when. Until then, the revolution remains forever poised on the brink of victory, and every child must prepare.

### Disrupting the Narrative?

Today, the DPRK is experiencing a boom in the distribution of Western and South Korean children's culture, eroding the stranglehold of the traditional narratives of taint and redemption explored in this paper. Rather presciently, Kim Jong-il once confessed to kidnapped South Korean filmmaker Shin Sang-ok that, "if we start airing foreign films on TV and everywhere, then only nihilistic thoughts will emerge out of them."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, young defector Park Yeon-mi demonstrates the kind of "nihilism" a Hollywood movie like James Cameron's *Titanic* – once deemed safe enough for state-television – is likely to inspire. As she reflects:

Everything in North Korea was about the leader, all the books, music and TV ... what was shocking to me about *Titanic* was that the guy gave his life for the woman and not for his country – I just couldn't understand that mindset ... In North Korean culture, love is a shameful thing and nobody talked about it in public ... The regime was not interested in human desires and love stories were banned ... That's when I knew something was wrong. All people, it didn't matter their colour, culture or language, seemed to care about love apart from us – why did the regime not allow us to express it? ... All the foreign movies we saw about love affected me and my generation ... Now we no longer want to die for the regime, we want to die for love.<sup>61</sup>

Whilst Jack and Rose might not induce revolution, the consumption of foreign media creates a higher threshold for the reception of official narratives, precipitating cultural transformation, perhaps to a point where the nation is no longer recognisable in the image of its official self-portrait.

From the perspective of Pyongyang's grip on the imaginations of its children, the only phenomenon more hostile than the spread of Western culture is the spread of *South Korean* culture.<sup>62</sup> As Andrei Lankov writes, "a person who regularly watches South Korean TV shows or films is unlikely to believe much of what their country's official propaganda says. From the point of view of North Korea's leadership, this is a worrying and dangerous

<sup>58</sup> Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 137.

<sup>59</sup> Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 147.

<sup>60</sup> Kim, *Illusive Utopia*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> Nathan Thompson, "'Watching *Titanic* made me realise something was wrong in my country,' says North Korean defector," *The Guardian* (London), 26 August 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/26/north-korea-defector-titanic>

<sup>62</sup> Park Hae-hyun, "Dictators Can't Stop the Desire for Fun," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), 18 August 2011. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/08/18/2011081801133.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/08/18/2011081801133.html)

phenomenon.”<sup>63</sup> Yet the final years of Kim Jong-il’s rule, and the first of Kim Jong-un’s, have seen the flourishing of an unofficial South Korean wave, from Kaesong to the Sino-Korean border.<sup>64</sup> North Korean children consume South Korean cinema and television on DVD players, using USBs and pre-loaded MP3 players to trade files on the market, and between trusted friends.<sup>65</sup> As a man from South Hwanghae Province explains, children “have these things on memory sticks. They watch them, copy them, pass them on, and that is how South Korean media spreads among the young. Of course they are taught not to do it, but kids are inquisitive and so they find a way to do it regardless. Being told not to watch South Chosun [South Korean] films makes some do it all the more.”<sup>66</sup> It should not come as too great a surprise this even included Psy’s 2012 viral sensation, “Gangnam Style,” even in a nation without the internet, distributed via *samizdat* dvds.<sup>67</sup> The tide is rising, children’s culture evolving beyond the orthodox reality created by tradition alone. Perhaps most importantly, the illegality of such material means foreign media must be consumed exclusively among trusted family and friends, traded through trusted networks, opening space both for the evolution of an anti-regime counter-culture, and the flourishing of private lives outside the matrix of the state’s revolutionary orthodoxies. The government’s stranglehold over its citizens’ lives is receding.<sup>68</sup> In a shifting cultural environment, how is today’s child to read new books, published in the era of Kim Jong-un, yet burdened with titles such as *Illustrated Reminiscences by the Anti-Japanese Guerrillas: We Are Not To Stop Our Struggle Any Time and Anywhere?*<sup>69</sup>

Seeking to adapt, Pyongyang has embarked upon a program of “cultural inoculation,” administering small doses of foreign children’s culture in the hope they will prove sufficient to ward off a fever that might kill the patient. The New Year’s Day concert at the Mangyongdae Schoolchildren’s Palace in 2014 traded heavily on the iconography of Western Christmas culture, a child artist dressed as Santa Claus, accompanied by elves, snowflakes, and Christmas trees, juxtaposed – presumably without irony – against a choir resplendent in the traditional uniforms of the Children’s Union,<sup>70</sup> and the inaugural concert of the Moranbong Band was notoriously accompanied by a dancing Mickey Mouse. Importantly, Lee and Seo have cautioned that, “our tendency to define anything unorthodox as counterhegemonic . . . ignores the reality that the forms and contents of resistance are predetermined by the dominating culture’s design.” It is a wise caveat. Nevertheless, even they acknowledge that the “deeply contradictory” relationship between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the DPRK vastly exceeds that in other authoritarian social systems, such as the Soviet Union,<sup>71</sup> or indeed the Nazi Germany described by Myers, with its Disney-decaled Luftwaffe.<sup>72</sup> After all, if such culture posed no threat to the DPRK’s social system, there

<sup>63</sup> Andrei Lankov, “Kim Jong-un Trying to Cleanse South Korean TV films,” *AsiaN*, 8 August 2014. <http://www.theasian.asia/archives/89333>

<sup>64</sup> Lankov, *North of the DMZ*, 309-314.

<sup>65</sup> Woo-young Lee & Jungmin Seo, “Cultural Pollution’ from the South?” in *North Korea In Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society*, eds. Kyung-ae Park & Scott Snyder (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 195-207.

<sup>66</sup> Daily NK Special Investigation, “Kids Helping the Kims, and Kids Pushing Back,” *Daily NK*, 3 June 2014. <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk02900&num=11927>

<sup>67</sup> “Gangnam Style Reaches N. Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), 4 February 2013. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2013/02/04/2013020400970.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/02/04/2013020400970.html)

<sup>68</sup> Nat Kretchun & Jane Kim, *A Quiet Opening: North Koreans In A Changing Media Environment* (Washington D.C.: Intermedia, 2012), 23.

<sup>69</sup> Kim Jung-song, *Illustrated Reminiscences by the Anti-Japanese Guerrillas: We Are Not To Stop Our Struggle Any Time and Anywhere* (Pyongyang: Kum Song Youth Publishing House, 2012).

<sup>70</sup> KCNA, “Schoolchildren’s New Year Performance Given,” *KCNA* (Pyongyang), 2 January 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Woo-young Lee & Jungmin Seo, “Cultural Pollution’ from the South?” in *North Korea In Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society*, eds. Kyung-ae Park & Scott Snyder (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 204-205.

<sup>72</sup> Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 168.

would not be such consistent editorialising in state media, vituperating that, “the first target in the imperialists’ bourgeois ideological and cultural infiltration [of North Korea] is sensitive youth and children.”<sup>73</sup>

#### Conclusions:

Children’s culture remains a potent tool in Pyongyang’s propaganda arsenal, and the Kim Jong Un era has seen a concerted renewal of the state’s effort to win the hearts and minds of children, especially through a revitalized Children’s Union. Yet a new generation of children is rising, born after the Famine, with no recollection of the old DPRK, of a revolutionary state at the peak of its powers. Children growing up with the market, not the Public Distribution System, their attachment to Kim Il-sung taught, not remembered. They have not lived during the Cold War, still less the Korean War or Japanese Occupation, which remain cornerstones of national mythology and, therefore, legitimacy. Moreover, such children are increasingly exposed to the material temptations of the West and South Korea, devaluing the didactic narratives of local art and literature previously disseminated unopposed.

As Jang Jin-sung reflects, “one reason why North Korea is unable to pursue reform and open itself more to the world is that this would risk exposing core dogmas of the state as mere fabrications.”<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, cultural transformation will accomplish from the grassroots what the state must never dare attempt, the reform and opening of the North Korean mind. Today’s children are thus on the frontline of a battle to control tomorrow’s Peninsula. Failure to win their hearts and minds will not result in immediate regime collapse, but will ultimately fail to ward off the natural entropy of the state’s charismatic authority, as a new generation comes of age, vested not in tradition and ideology, but in material wealth, markets, and increasingly internationalised exchange of information. In 1934, a young Kim Kum-sun died a martyr at the hands of Japanese imperialists, and today’s children are called upon to emulate her example. Yet it seems the old tales of colonial taint, and revolutionary redemption, are rapidly losing power, just as Kim Jong-il had feared. As Park Yeon-mi explains, North Korean youth are still seeking redemption, yet they are seeking it elsewhere, writing that, “Now we no longer want to die for the regime, we want to die for love.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “The first target in the imperialists’ bourgeois ideological & cultural infiltration is the sensitive youth & children,” *Rodong Sinmun* (Pyongyang), 24 September 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader*, 127.

<sup>75</sup> Nathan Thompson, “‘Watching *Titanic* made me realise something was wrong in my country,’ says North Korean defector,” *The Guardian* (London), 26 August 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/26/north-korea-defector-titanic>

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