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Between Self-Reliance and Globalism: Commercial Filmmaking in North Korean Cinema

Though often pictured as a stagnant society that vehemently refuses any significant change, North Korea has undergone considerable social transformations after the abrupt collapse of socialist block. The constant crises since around 1990 made North Korea gravely concern about the very existence of nation and led it to make drastic changes to its socio-economic structures, foreign policies, and even its governing ideology of *Juche*. Due to its efforts to cope with a range of dire challenges North Korea faces, the nation often sends conflicting “messages” to not only its people but also the outside world. On the one hand, North Korea relentlessly stresses the importance of “our unique socialism” and its application to every aspect of the society in order to reassure its people that North Korea’s socialism is the only reliable social system that keeps the nation intact from the multi-layered threats. Yet on the other hand, North Korea endeavors to reach out to get connected to the emerging global economy as an attempt to boost up its constantly faltering economy. Torn between these two contradicting desires and needs, North Korea struggles to fixate its national identity at this time of the crisis. Contemporary North Korean film production evidences and reflects these political and economic changes as well as issues they have brought to North Korea’s attempts to reconstruct its national identity. North Korean film, just like other art and cultural forms from this country, is either seen as mere propaganda and/or overtly political cinema and thus unworthy of critical scrutiny or simply viewed one of few windows available to us through which we could peep into this secluded society.

Challenging these myopic perspectives, this paper aims to shed light on the dynamics of contemporary North Korean cinema, focusing on North Korean film's growing interests in commercial aspect of filmmaking, its efforts to break into the global film circuit, and their social, cultural and historical implications.

It may not be easy to imagine big-budget, multinational entertainment or genre movies that serve to entertain its audience from such nation as North Korea – the nation which is not only stigmatized as “axis of evil” but also considered to be isolated from the global flows of capital, people and resources. It is true that cinema's political function is stressed more strongly ever before due to constantly changing political climate, but its other potentials are now equally emphasized. In other words, cinema continues to function as a major tool that helps North Korea (re)shape its nation-ness and at the same time the film, as an influential “soft power,” is now regarded as a potential resource with which North Korea wishes to revitalize its economy and also actively influence the global perception of North Korea. These seemingly conflicting two aspects of contemporary North Korean film production, however, are actually closely interwoven. Deemed as the first co-produced film between North Korea and Western Europe, for instance, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (2012) represents the aforementioned new currents in contemporary North Korean cinema. Since its premier at Pyongyang International Film Festival in 2012, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* has been invited to more than two dozens of international film festivals, creating much hype in the international film circuit. The worldwide interest the film continues to generate has to do with the film's “unexpected-ness.” The collaboration with European filmmakers and film firms attracted much attention, and equally importantly, the film's focus on and exposure of everyday lives of ordinary North Koreans also piqued the curiosity of international audiences that did not quite expect to see an upbeat romantic comedy that narrates a triumphant story of a female worker who aspires to become a

trapeze performer from North Korea. Though described as “an unusual film,” “a rarity,”¹ *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* is actually not the first “rare” North Korean film that caught considerable interest from the international film circuit. *A Schoolgirl’s Diary*, a local hit produced in 2006 made its way to Cannes Film Festival in 2007, and was well received at various international film festivals. In a similar manner to *Comrade Kim*, *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* invites viewers to experience mundane lives of North Koreans for it portrays struggles of the family of a scientist who leaves his family in a rural village to dedicate himself to a national scientific project. Though global media and film critics’ responses to these two films that enjoyed considerable attention outside of North Korea varied, they tend to largely revolve around a question of whether these films that betray a certain expectation toward North Korean cultural production and actively speak to global audiences could be any indication that signals changes in North Korea on social, political and economic levels or it is a mere variation of North Korean propaganda. While this is an important question to ask, however, I argue too much focus on it would rather leave out many more important questions with which we could try to make sense of the compound developments of North Korean films for the past few decades. In order to better understand recent North Korean films that garner international recognition and probe what the production and reception of the films represent, henceforth, one needs to place these films in not only North Korea’s social and political vectors but also its film-historical context.

To provide a historical background for the recent productions of films geared to make an appeal to international audiences and North Korean filmmakers’ efforts to produce films that could generate overseas revenues, it’s imperative to look into the filmmaking of the 1980s when some of the major changes took place in the field of film production. In fact, the 1980s was a watershed period for North Korean film production, as it responded to some

¹ Jonathan Landreth, “Filming a North Korean Dream,” *The New York Times* (July 30, 2012); Ron Gluckman, “Romantic North Korea,” *The Wall Street Journal* (March 20, 2013).

crucial transformations that affected every aspect of North Korean society. Let me start with the 1984 musical film *Love, Love, My Love* that marks a certain turning point for North Korean cinema and indeed nicely sums up some key features of the 1980s film production. Among others, the film can be seen as North Korea's first experiment with the concept of blockbuster; its budget, content, formal aesthetics, and audience reception were something unheard of at the time. Shin Sang-Ok, a South Korean director who directed and produced a number of films, including *Love, Love, My Love*, in North Korea after his abduction in Hong Kong in 1978 notes that this film administered a great deal of cultural shock when it was released². The film is based on the classical literature *Tale of Chunhyang* which tackles the absurd feudalistic system, yet for many decades *Tale of Chunhyang* has been criticized in North Korea for "*Tale of Chunhyang* depicting the love between different classes does give a bad influence on young generation."³ Therefore one of the most popular classical literary works in Korea had been banned since the 60s in North Korea until 1980 when the filmic adaptation of *Tale of Chunhyang* was made under the guidance of Kim Jong Il. Compared to the 1980 film that focuses explicitly on the popular movement and class struggle, Shin's version is less didactic and instead much more entertaining; Shin employs the Western musical in his version and incorporates it with traditional Korean dances in order to create spectacular musical scenes. According to Shin, *Love, Love, My Love* was so popular that even illegal admission tickets were sold for the first time in the North Korean film history. Even Kim Il-Sung highly praised the film and its unprecedented success, noting "[T]his film is good for pastime and also truly useful to introduce Korean-ness to foreigners. So keep on producing period films like *Love, Love, My Love*."⁴ Kim's comment illuminates some crucial changes about to occur in North Korean cinema such as North Korean film's desire to promote their productions internationally, the importance of making entertainment films,

² Shin, Sang Ok, *NK Report, Chosun Daily*, November 5, 2000.

³ Shin, Sang Ok and Eun Hee Choi, *Record of the Kidnap*, Seoul: Dong-Ah Ilbosa, 1988, vol.2, p.111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

and the sudden revival of period epics and costume dramas. Shin Sang-Ok is an important figure in the rapidly changing North Korean cinema of the 1980s. Kim Jong Il, who had sought a new direction by eliminating banalities in North Korean cinema, expected Shin who had worked in a different filmmaking environment to ameliorate North Korean cinema. Shin explains in his book about his life and work in North Korea that this was the main reason of his being kidnapped; he adds, in fact, that Kim Jong Il allowed Shin to make any film he wanted. Kim Jong Il even established the studio, Shin Film, for only Shin and his wife. With unconditional support from Kim Jong Il, Shin was able to break many taboos in North Korean cinema and accelerated the diversification of subjects in North Korean cinema. In his films, Shin treats the forbidden subjects such as love triangle and sexual violence against women. Notably, Shin's two films, *The Secret Envoy Unreturned* (1984) and *The Salt* (1985), won prizes at the Czech International Film Festival and Moscow International Film Festival respectively.⁵ Since *The Flower Girl* won Special Prize at Czech Film International Festival in 1972, there had been no North Korean film shown at international film festivals until Shin's two films were garnered.⁶

Producing films like *Love, Love, My Love* that aim to both "educate" and "entertain" became another important task for North Korean filmmakers from the 1980s. Toward the end of the 1980s, the propagandist function has gradually been taken up by the documentary, and instead the entertaining elements have been stressed in the feature films.⁷ In fact, if the partyness is greatly described in a script, the North Korean government did not produce it if it lacks elements entertaining audiences. One reason for this change is that the party has begun to acknowledge the fact that overt political voices and didactic messages embedded in feature films do not work well. In a talk, for example, Kim Jong Il points out

⁵ *Love, Love, My Love* was also shown at London International Film Festival in 1985. (Cf. Shin and Choi, vol.2, p.260)

⁶ Shin and Choi, vol.2, p. 230.

⁷ Choi, Chuk Ho, *A History of North Korean Cinema*, p.109.

North Korean films rely too much on dialogue to easily convey a message, which made viewers to lose their interest.⁸ The growing emphasis on incorporating elements of entertainment resulted in the emergence of genre films such as comedy, historical epics, action films, and family melodrama in the 1980s. Yet it is important to note that the production of these genre films was keenly associated with changes that ensued in North Korean society as well. In particular, the revival of period film is worth discussing it here. Since the cinema's main task after the introduction of *Juche* ideology in the 1960s was interweaving Kim's personal life with the nation's founding myth, the majority of the films produced during the *Juche* era - almost all the films made from the mid to late 1960s throughout the 1970s, in particular - rarely move back beyond the 1920s. This denial of the pre-1930s, pre-Kim Il Sung history was quite extreme as any artistic heritage became suddenly oppressed with the advent of *Juche*. In a talk held in 1947, Kim Il Sung stated, 'we must give up the old and feudalistic in our cultural heritage, but need to absorb the progressive and people-ness from it.' Yet in his 1973 book, *On the Art of the Cinema*, Kim Jong Il calls for an adjustment of the position toward the traditional in the *Juche* era and writes, 'in developing communist art and literature, there is nothing for the working class to adopt from the old art and literature which cater to the tastes and sentiments of the exploiting classes'⁹. Until the mid-1960s, period films that highlight the class struggle such as *Tale of Chunhyang* (1959), *Tale of Heungbu* (1963), *Tale of Yangban* (1964), and *Kim Jong Ho* (1965), based on classical literature, were often produced. However, period films virtually disappeared from the late 1960s until 1980 when *Tale of Chunhyang* (1980) was produced again. Historical epics and costume dramas came back only in the 1980s when a revision was made to *Juche*, selectively recuperating Korean histories before Kim Il Sung to better systematically position North Korea as the one and only true heir to Korea's long history.

⁸ Kim, Jong Il, *A Talk on May 23, 1992*, p.27.

⁹ Kim Jong Il, *On the Art of Cinema*, p.1

Importantly, almost all period films touch on the theme of loyalty: to the nation, parents, friends, and even lovers. By highlighting the classical plot that only loyal patriotism and love for motherland can keep the nation intact, period films emphasize the nationalism and, in so doing, broaden the Kim-Il Sung-oriented *Juche* to the wider nationalistic *Juche*.

Encouraged by the constant domestic and international success, North Korea launched the first ambitious project targeting the international market. In 1985 Shin Sang-Ok produced and directed *Bulgasari*, a science fiction/monster film that targeted the markets of Japan and socialist countries. The *Bulgasari* (the invincible) is a legendary monster that leads a popular movement around fourteen century Koryo Dynasty. Shin states, “[A]lthough critics focus on the popular movement described in *Bulgasari*, I wanted to make a film to warn to those countries making the nuclear weapon.”¹⁰ This film and the legend itself are surely allegorical. *Bulgasari* is made by a forger who refuses the orders of a regional governor who extorts all the iron goods from the people to make military armaments. The forger returns all the irons to people, defying the order, and as a result he is confined in prison. Upon his death, he makes a small statue, a legendary monster, *Bulgasari*, out of steamed rice, and it is handed over to his daughter with his body. *Bulgasari* comes to life when the daughter drips her blood on it while she is needling. *Bulgasari* only eats irons and its size increases when it eats irons. Forger’s death triggers the peasant uprising, but the uprising soon turns out to be failure. However, when *Bulgasari* joins the uprising, the situation is dramatically changed. With the lead of *Bulgasari*, who is eating up all the military armaments and becoming an enormously huge monster, the peasantry finally succeeds in overthrowing the government. However, in post-revolution period, *Bulgasari* becomes a useless monster, consuming all the iron goods including agricultural tools. Thus the daughter, the creator of *Bulgasari*, decides to get rid of *Bulgasari* for the sake of people. She intentionally hides herself inside a big bell which *Bulgasari* is going to eat, and finally

¹⁰ Shin, Sang Ok, *NK Report*, *Chosun Daily*, October 15, 2000.

she and *Bulgasari* die together. It is interesting that Shin invited Japanese special effects experts worked for *Godzilla* films in Toho studio in producing *Bulgasari*, because *Godzilla* itself is a clear allegory of atomic bomb and also represents the Japanese's fear for it. However, the North Korean blockbuster *Bulgasari*, never crossed the border of North Korea until 1998 when the film was released in Japan; Shin, the producer and director of the film, was exiled to U.S. Embassy in Austria with his wife during their next films' pre-production travel right after *Bulgasari* was produced. As a result, the film was banned in North Korea, and all the plans for exporting and promoting the film overseas were immediately cancelled. There had been several attempts to release the film in Japan where *Bulgasari* was publicized from its pre-production stage, but the film was released much later in 1998. *Bulgasari* was released in South Korea in 1999 with the honor of the first theatrical release of a North Korean film, thanks partially to the improving relations between the two Koreas, but it was not successful. It seems that fifteen years are enough to make the film and its special effects look outdated.

The miserable failure of *Bulgasari* project was a crucial set-back for North Korean film industry's plan to export its films. However, it continued to test the waters through a number of strategic moves. North Korean cinema began to co-produce films and other media products with film and media-makers from Italy, Japan, Hong Kong, and even South Korea. Another landmark event took place in 1987 when Pyongyang International Film Festival, the first international film festival of North Korea, was held. Officially, the festival aims at "Intensifying the cooperation and interchanges among the developing countries."¹¹ Yet the promotion of North Korean films seems to be a practical end of the festival; during the festival, the film market is open, and any country-even any private film company-can participate in the market.¹² The serious concern for the promotion and introduction of North

¹¹ A Report on Third Pyongyang International Film Festival, *Chosung Yonghwa*, November 1992, p.28.

¹² A Report on Third Pyongyang International Film Festival, *Chosun Yonghwa*, September 1992, p. 55.

Korean films to international market is clearly revealed in the now-defunct film magazine, *Chosun Yonghwa*. Every single issue published in the 1980s and 1990s contains a section for the reports on North Korean films shown in other countries and film festivals. All these evidence that North Korean cinema is no longer confined to North Korea and is beginning to acknowledge the cultural and economic potentials of cinema. In 2000, after more than a decade after its first blockbuster *Bulgasari*, North Korea produced another commercial spectacle, aiming again to make some ripples internationally: *Soul's Protest* that portrays the sinking of Ukishima-maru, a Japanese ship sunk when bringing back Koreans living in Japan back to Korea just a few days after Korea was liberated from Japan's colonial rule. Promoted as "North Korean Titanic," The film has all the features a blockbuster should have, ranging from its unprecedented production cost, over 10,000 extras featured in its spectacular reenactment of the tragic historical event, and the introduction of North Korea's first CG technology developed by its own engineers and experts in the country.¹³ When a Hong Kong film firm picked up the film to distribute it internationally after being screened at Hong Kong film festival, North Korean filmmakers were optimistic about the film's success, but it failed to be exported to any country other than South Korea where the film was screened just once as part of an event that commemorated the victims of Ukishima-maru.¹⁴

On the Green Carpet (2001) was North Korea's next "global" project after *Soul's Protest*. Unlike *Bulgasari* or *Soul's Protest*, the film achieved immediate success internationally, perhaps because this film was radically different from the two blockbusters. The story of this romantic comedy revolves around two young teachers who prepare elementary school students for mass games. When the film was played in Berlin Film Festival, it was much more positively than any other North Korean films primarily due to

¹³ "Korean Titanic Amazes Moscow and Hong Kong Audience," *People's Korea* (July 25, 2001).

¹⁴ Johannes Schönherr, *North Korean Cinema; A History*, p.152.

its portrayal of everyday life in North Korea. Since then North Korea filmmakers seemed to turn to a different tactic in seeking to make an international appeal. Indeed the films that have been globally recognized for the past decade are works that represent lives of ordinary people such as *On the Green Carpet*, and *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*, and *A Schoolgirl's Diary*. Importantly, many of such films are comedies that describe North Koreans' desires, emotions, their everyday challenges, and even social problems in a lighthearted manner. As a matter of fact, comedy film has emerged as the most popular genre in North Korea since the 1980s. The dominance of comedy in North Korean cinema is a direct response to challenged North Korea faces. In an article about the film *People Whom We Met at Daedong River* (1993), a North Korean critic argues for the importance of comedy in describing the cheerful society.

Today the firm integration of the leader, the party and masses as a sole social and political being is a characteristic of our society. The description of the lives of people who strive to build a happy large family and live cheerful lives in a beautiful and sublime manner becomes a current. An artwork is required to depict and represent this changed reality of contemporary society... *People Whom We Met at Daedong River* is a comedy full of humor, which represents the real picture of our society in which everyone is a member of a large family with a bright, cheerful, and optimistic overtone.¹⁵

Basically, this cultural trend is rooted in the socialist optimism, but this optimism is more in demand in the 1990s' North Korea. In a talk about the serial film, *The Nation and Destiny*,

¹⁵ Shin, Ki Myong, *The Protagonist and Humor in the Light Comedy*, Chosun Yonghwa, October 1993, p.16.

Kim Jong Il states, “artworks should represent the revolutionary optimism insightfully,”¹⁶ and explains the reason as below:

For the last several years, socialism has been abandoned and capitalism has been restored in many countries. Yet we do not need to be discouraged or disappointed. Our future is bright and optimistic regardless of many obstacles. The question is to prove the rightness and meaningfulness of our unique socialism... Defending socialism will give us a victory, but yielding socialism will bring us a death. We must defend our unique socialism until the end of our lives. No enemy can make us surrender. Our will for rightness of *Juche* and victory is strong. Filmmakers and other artists should engrave our optimistic will deeply into their works.¹⁷

In order to provide people with a firm belief in *Juche* and thus make them hold on to “our unique socialism,” films are required to remind people of the greatness of the society. Naturally, the comedy is a perfect genre for this purpose. Through portraying North Korea as a cheerful and carefree society, comedy preaches domestic audiences not to forget that this utopia has been possible only with our unique socialism and warns that doubting the ideas of ‘Self Reliance’ will bring an end to this utopia. For international audiences, in the meantime, North Korean comedy’s appeal lies in something different; these films allow them to look into everyday lives of North Koreans and thus satisfy their desire to peek in on this mysterious country as stories of the comedy typically revolves around ordinary people. And also importantly, the comedy influences international audiences’ perception (and even stereotypes)

¹⁶ Kim Jong Il, A Talk on May 23, 1992, p.25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

about North Korea in a positive fashion as this seemingly non-political genre offers them a rare chance to see different aspects of North Korea.

It is unquestionable that writing a national history and constructing a national identity is still the primary concern for North Korean cinema. Ever since the banner of “our socialism” has been more ardently raised after the break down of socialist countries, the cinema has played its main role in keeping on assuring and reassuring North Koreans that only a strong belief in *Juche* and their leaders will make it possible to end their economic, social and political sufferings. However, cinema is now seen something more than a mere political or ideological institution. While its political function is stressed more strongly than ever before, its cultural and economic potentials are also highlighted. For the past couple of decades, North Korean filmmakers have endeavored to find a way to best incorporate these two rather contradictory elements into their works. As discussed thus far, this proves to be not an easy task, but these efforts are what truly drive current film production of North Korea. In this regard, the films that garnered considerable global attentions are not “the rarities” that stand out from the rest of North Korean cinema. Rather, they typify the ways in which all the contradictions and considerations are complexly intertwined in contemporary North Korean film productions.