USE OF THESES

This copy is supplied for purposes of private study and research only. Passages from the thesis may not be copied or closely paraphrased without the written consent of the author.
The Implantation of Socialist Realism in the DPRK and North Korean Literary Politics 1945-1960

Tatiana Gabroussenko

China and Korea Centre
Faculty of Asian Studies
Australian National University

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University in May 2004
This thesis is my own original work.

Tatiana Gabroussenko
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ............................................. v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................. vi

INTRODUCTION ........................................ 1

Sources .............................................. 1
Brief review of relevant publications .......... 2
Approach ........................................... 12
Structure .......................................... 20

Chapter 1. SOVIET MODELS AND THE FIRST STEPS OF SOCIALIST REALISM IN NORTH KOREA ......... 29

Soviet Literature in Korea ......................... 29
Image of the “elder brother” ....................... 36
The proper place of a Communist intellectual .. 38
Acquisition of Soviet cultural images and clichés .. 43
Social Idylls ....................................... 47

Chapter 2. SOVIET KOREANS IN NORTH KOREAN LITERATURE: LIVING CONDUCTORS OF “SOCIALIST REALISM” – THE CASE OF CHO KI-CH’ÖN ...

Cho Ki-Ch’ö’n: the Pre-Korean experience ........ 69
Cho Ki-Ch’ö’n in North Korea ...................... 76
Discussions over Paektusan ......................... 82
Cho Ki-Ch’ö’n after Paektusan: “proletarian poet” or “hidden lyricist”? 88
Cho Ki-Ch’ö’n during the Korean War .......... 94
Cho Ki-Ch’ö’n’s legacy .......................... 98

Chapter 3. YI KI-YÕNG: A SUCCESSFUL LITERARY CADRE ............................................. 101

Scholarly perceptions of Yi Ki-yöng .............. 101
Childhood and youth ............................ 106
Yi’s pre-KAPF writings ............................ 109
Yi’s first KAPF period (1925-1927) ............. 111
Yi’s second KAPF period (1927-1934) .......... 118
Kohyang (Native Land) (1933-1934) ............ 122
Decline of the leftist motifs (1934-1945) ....... 127
After liberation .................................. 129

Ttang (Land) (1948-1949) – the troublesome fate of a “patristic text” 131
**Chapter 4. YI T'AE-JUN: THE FAILURE OF A “SOLDIER ON THE CULTURAL FRONT”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yi T'ae-jun before Liberation</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi T'ae-jun after Liberation: 1945-46</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi T'ae-jun in the North: a political...</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi T'ae-jun after 1953: the purge and rejection</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 5. NORTH KOREAN CRITICS AS POLITICAL EXECUTIONERS:**

**“LOOKING UPWARD”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1947, the “Unghyang incident”</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First factional clashes.</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigns against Yim Hwa and Kim Nam-Ch’ŏn</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion:**

**“SOLDIERS ON THE IDEOLOGICAL FRONT” VS. “ENGINEERS OF THE HUMAN SOUL”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

The first decade of North Korea’s history was a formative period for the country’s political and social institutions, and its literature was no exception. The system of political management of literary affairs, sets of established clichés and officially sanctioned topics which were promoted in these years redefined North Korean culture and moved it in a novel direction.

The present thesis outlines the history of North Korean literary policy from 1945 to the early 1960s and discusses how this development reflected the contemporary political situation in the DPRK and influenced the subsequent cultural and social history of that country. It pays special attention to two major intertwined problems of early North Korean cultural history: the implementation of the Soviet-originated model of “socialist realism” and the political campaigns directed against the famous intellectuals Yim Hwa, Yi T’ae-jun, Kim Nam-ch’on and their colleagues. The research traces how imported notions of “proper” Communist literature were imposed on the North Korean cultural world and how the North Korean intellectuals struggled to adjust themselves to these new demands. We also analyse the factors behind the purges of the early 1950s, consider possible reasons which determined the fates of particular writers and trace the impact of these campaigns on the North Korean cultural and political atmosphere in general.

The thesis draws on a variety of sources ranging from interviews with Korean and Soviet participants in the events, materials from public and family archives, memoirs of North Korean defectors, items from the contemporary press, original literary and critical texts and other documents.
Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to thank the Australian National University for awarding me the scholarship and travel grants which have made this research possible. I consider myself to have been fortunate to be able to conduct my project in the stimulating atmosphere of the Australian National University, with its highly intelligent and open community of scholars. Among many colleagues I am particularly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Andrei Lankov. Without his constant care and support as a mentor and friend this project could not have been completed. I would also like to thank Prof. Kenneth Wells for his assistance and valuable advice at various stages of this project. My research has benefited greatly from his careful reading and suggestions. I am also much indebted to Dr. Shin Gi-hyun who provided me with help and advice.

I owe a particular debt to the interviewees who were helpful and kind in sharing valuable information with me, especially Chŏng Ryul, Cho Yurii and Elena Davy dova (Pak Myŏng-sun). I want to thank the Russian Koreanists who helped me during my study trip to Moscow, and Dr. Leo Kontsevich in particular. Much assistance was provided by the staff of the Russian National Library, especially by its deputy director Boris Perli. I also found the copies of original North Korean materials which were kindly provided by Dr. Brian Myers extremely valuable.

I am grateful to Darrell Dorrington for his help with editing the text as well as for his valuable advice. Last but by no means least I would like to thank my family and friends for their constant faith and support.

All translations of Chinese and Russian language materials, except where indicated, are my own. For all mistakes, errors and matters of opinion in this work I alone am responsible.
had at their disposal a rich lode of factual information about the North Korean intellectual world, including a considerable amount of otherwise unobtainable data. For this reason these works are not without academic value, even if one has to learn to ignore the obligatory references to the wisdom of the Party and the ubiquitous quotations from Lenin.

Unfortunately, the dramatic political changes which occurred in the USSR during the last decade have not only caused the previous politicised agenda to be seen as outdated, but they have also rendered research into North Korean literature highly unpopular among post-Soviet students of Korean culture. Thus the former Soviet academic tradition of North Korean literary studies has no continuity today.

The situation in South Korean scholarship is the reverse. While before the late 1980s, studies of North Korean literature were rare, the political atmosphere after the collapse of military rule in 1987 made North Korean literature a prominent academic issue. Most South Korean publications demonstrate a remarkable knowledge of North Korean literary texts and personalities and offer valuable background information about the historical roots of North Korean literary processes. Many of today’s Seoul academics, even those who do not specialise in North Korean literature, incorporate detailed analyses of North Korean works into their literary studies. Yet in some respects the South Korean investigations of North Korean literature should not be accepted without reservation. Like their Soviet colleagues the South Korean scholars are not politically detached: they, as a rule, consider their subject through the prism of leftist and nationalist biases. In the light of this now dominant political agenda of South Korean academia, North Korean literary development is normally perceived as an inseparable part of a conjoined “glorious national tradition”, which in the first instance is to be defended and glorified. We can only agree with a remark of the American scholar Brian Myers about the tendency of South Korean scholarship to “gloss over”


7 I must cite a few examples of the scholarship which particularly impressed me in this regard. Kim Yun-sik, Yim Hwa yŏngu [A Study of Yim Hwa], Seoul: Munhwa ssasangsa, 1989; Kang Yong-ju, Pyŏkch’o Hong Myŏnghung yŏngu [A Study of Pyŏkch’o Hong Myŏng-hŭi], Seoul: Ch’angjak-kwa pip’yŏngsa, 1999; Yi Sang-gyŏng, Yi Ki-yŏng sidea-wa munhak [Yi Ki-yŏng: His Era and His Literature], Seoul: Pulpit’, 1994.

8 See for instance the works of South Korean scholar Na Pyŏng-ch’ol, who in his literary studies often resorts to North Korean literary patterns. (See Na Pyŏng-ch’ol, Sŏsŏl-ui ihae [Understanding the Novel], Seoul: Munye ch’ulp’ansa, 1998; Na Pyŏng-ch’ol, Munhak-ui ihae [Understanding Literature], Seoul: Munye ch’ulp’ansa, 1995).
the deficiencies of this literature and judge it on the basis of the perceived “good intentions” of an author.  

When accessing North Korean literature, Seoul scholars also often demonstrate an excessive trust in the thoroughly biased verdicts of North Korean officialdom, at times totally embracing this position. What is particularly important for the purposes of this work is that the majority of the South Korean scholars, while admitting the connections between the North Korean literary world and Pyongyang’s politics, tend to isolate this literature from the political context of the era and overlook the overly earthy, self-serving motives which at times feature quite strongly in the activities of North Korean writers. 

As an exception to this tendency I would mention the work of Yi Ki-pong, *Puk-ŭi munhak-kwa yesurin (North Korean Men of Literature and the Arts)* (1986). This book, written during the Cold War by a conservative Seoul non-academic expert on North Korean questions, has its obvious limitations such as the excessively emotional approach of the author, the poorly devised structure of the work and its repetitive arguments, etc. Still, in general Yi Ki-pong’s perspective on the North Korean literary world is quite original. What I would regard as the authors’ particular strength is his efforts to consider the development of North Korean literature through the prism of the non-literary political currents of the time.

Western scholarship has not been too prolific in the realm of North Korean literary studies. However, the scarcity of such works is compensated for by their quality. One must mention the two-volume classic account of Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea* (1972) which among numerous aspects also deals with North Korea’s literature. It also contains a short but perceptive article by Marshal R. Pihl, “Engineers of the Human Soul: North Korean Literature Today”, the author of which

---

9 Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, the Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK*, New York: Cornell University, 1994, 9.


considers North Korean literature within the context of its didactic tradition. In 1994 Western scholarship was enriched by the brilliant work of Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, the Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK*. Whilst being concerned with the activity of one particular writer, the work presents an original and coherent picture of North Korean literature in its formative years.

Now let us see how the major issues of the formative period of North Korean literature have been reflected in the above-mentioned scholarship.

Most of the scholars agree that the period 1945-1960 in North Korean literature was marked by the official implementation of the Soviet-originated doctrine of "socialist realism" as an artistic form of Communist ideology and politics in literature. Much like China, the USSR and other Eastern Block countries, in North Korea socialist realism was officially pronounced to be "the only method of creative activity in the field of literature and art, which is socialist in content and national in form". In the Charter One of the General Federation of Korean Literature and Arts Unions the fundamental function of the Federation was formulated as "to reward the working masses with Communist ideology and revolutionary tradition through literary and artistic activities under the leadership of the Workers’ Party of Korea". Thus the literary tendency, which in the pre-Liberation Korean intellectual world was associated exclusively with the realm of "proletarian literature", was after 1945 officially promoted as an obligatory course for all North Korean writers.

Most scholars agree with the definition of most mainstream North Korean literature as socialist realist. The sole exclusion is Brian Myers, who argued for "the failure of socialist realism" in the DPRK and the basic incompatibility of the exemplary works of North Korean literature with the major principles of socialist realism.

1945-1960 also witnessed various political campaigns and purges in the North Korean intellectual world, which firstly emerged around 1946 and reached a crescendo in 1953-1959. The victims of these campaigns (of which Yim Hwa, Yi T’ae-jun and Kim Nam-ch’ôn are the most famous figures) were formally accused, among other crimes and transgressions, of vicious deviations from the Party’s line of socialist realism and of promoting "bourgeois ideology". This official Pyongyang verdict has influenced the perception of modern scholars who tend to consider the political campaigns as largely ideological conflicts, as the principled struggle of proponents and opponents of socialist realism over this aesthetic and ideological doctrine.

It is no surprise that the DPRK discourse of literary history, being thoroughly politicised, presents the first years of the North Korean literary stage as a period of dramatic struggle between "progressive" protectors of the "genuine" authentic traditions of socialist realism (who were mostly ex-KAPF writers) and vicious

---


“reactionaries” (including Yim Hwa, Yi T’ae-jun and Kim Nam-ch’ŏn among others) who schemed to destroy the “progressive” traditions. The very titles of the majority of North Korean critical articles and books of the time are self-revealing: Hŏ Kyŏng, Munhak yesul punya-esŏ-ŭi kyegŭp t’u’chaeng (Class Struggle in Literature and the Arts) 17, Munye chŏnsŏne issŏsŏ-ŭi pandongjŏk purŭijyoa sasang-ŭl pandae hanyeō (Against Reactionary Bourgeois Ideas on the Literary and Artistic Front) 18, Ch’oe T’ak-ho “Uri munhak-ŭi sasangjŏk súngyŏlsŏng-ŭl wihae tang-ŭi t’ujaeng” (“The Struggle of Our Party for the Ideological Purity of Our Literature”), 19 or Ōm Ho-sŏk “Yi T’ae-jun-ŭi munhak-ŭi pandongjŏk ponjil” (“The Reactionary Essence of Yi T’aejun’s Literature”) 20, etc.

Contemporary North Korean scholarship still maintains a similar line, although there has been some modification in order to adjust to current political trends. South Korean scholar Pak T’ae-sang, in his account of recent alterations in North Korean literary historiography Pukhan munhak-ŭi hyŏnsang (The Situation in North Korean Literature), 21 relays in extravagant detail the updated North Korean version of the political events of 1953-1959 as they were recently described by the contemporary Pyongyang author Chang Hyŏng-jun. This author explains the purges of Yim Hwa, Yi T’ae-jun and Kim Nam-ch’ŏn as ... the exceptional wisdom and political vigilance of the “Beloved Leader” Kim Chŏng-il. According to Chang’s story, the “reactionary essence” of Yim Hwa’s poem “Nŏ Ōdie Innânya” (“Where Are You Now?”) (1951) was hidden even from seasoned experts, and that the canny insight into the work’s reactionary content was made possible by the wisdom of the then nine year old Kim Chŏng-il who spotted and wittingly analysed the reactionary “defeatism” and “pessimism” of the poem. This breakthrough which was achieved by the “rising genius” allegedly inspired the purge of the “hidden reactionary” Yim Hwa. 22

17 Hŏ Kyŏng, Munhak yesul punya-esŏ-ŭi kyegŭp t’u’jaeng [Class Struggle in Literature and the Arts], Pyongyang: Munhwa sŏnjŏnsŏng, 1953.
The picture of North Korean literature as a battlefield where protectors of the ideological purity of “socialist realism” fight its vicious and scheming enemies partially influenced Soviet scholarship as well. Pyongyang propagated its official line in the USSR through a multitude of propagandistic brochures and booklets which were translated into Russian such as *Rastsvet i razvitie koreiskoi kultury* (*The Prosperity and Development of Korean Literature*)\(^ {23}\) or Sin Gu-hyŏn’s *Koreiskaia literatura posle osvobozhdeniia* (*Korean Literature After Liberation*)\(^ {24}\), etc. These booklets were full of Stalinist notions and expressions which had originated in the Soviet propagandistic discourse but which had decisively gone out of fashion in the post-Stalinist USSR. Take, for instance, the following passage from Sin Gu-hyŏn’s booklet where he writes about the “reactionary anthology” *Ŭnhyang* (*Hidden Aroma*) (1946) and the scapegoats of the political campaigns of 1953-1956:

“The reactionary poems of *Hidden Aroma* idealised vulgar love. Publishing this garbage, their authors, being enemies of the people, tried to slander and pour filth over the Korean people who were moving along the path of the construction of the new life”; “Loudly declaring that “the national culture we are creating now should by no means be class conscious”, the clique of Yim Hwa attempted to give birth to a reactionary literature and arts... They strove to create a literature which would be servile to American imperialism”.\(^ {25}\)

The contemporary Soviet scholars were not pleased with these clauses which reminded them too painfully of their own Stalinist experience. Still, they were subject to certain political obligations which required them to support this supposedly “fraternal socialist state”.\(^ {26}\) For that reason, Soviet scholars who wrote about the North Korean literature of 1945-1960 were forced to include several passages about the “vicious activity of reactionaries” in their works. As a rule, these parts were rare and oblique and constituted little more than casual tributes to Pyongyang’s official line. V. Ivanova in “*Sovetskaia literatura v Koree (1945-1955)*” (“*Soviet Literature in Korea (1945-1955)*”)\(^ {27}\) and “*Sovetskaia voenno-patrioticheskaia literatura v Koree 40-50h*

\(^ {23}\) *Rastsvet i razvitie koreiskoi kultury* [The Prosperity and Development of Korean Culture], Pyongyang: Isdatel’stvo literatury na inostrannykh iazykh, 1959.


\(^ {25}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^ {26}\) The Soviet scholar V. Ivanova claimed that political censorship in academic studies on North Korean literature appeared excessive even by the notorious standards of the USSR in the late 1950s. Referring to her research on Korean literature in the early 1950s, she said: “It was a nightmare. We had to rewrite and rewrite it endlessly, in order to appease all the necessary political accents of the moment.” (Interview by telephone with V.I. Ivanova, Moscow, 03 February 2002). According to the senior Soviet scholar L. Kontzevich, there always existed a palpable disagreement between most Soviet Koreanists and the DPRK political line which some managed to express through Aesopian language. (Interview by telephone with L. Kontzevich, Moscow, 10 October 2003).

\(^ {27}\) V. I. Ivanova, “*Sovetskaia literatura v Koree*”, 190.
godov” (“Soviet war patriotic literature in Korea 1940-1950s”) referring to the decision of the presidium of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers’ Party of May 1947, claimed that “the Workers’ Party identified some mistakes on the literary front” and was determined to fight against “the remnants of bourgeois ideology” in the DPRK. S. Nam in Formirovanie narodnoi intelligentsii v KNDR (The Formation of the People’s Intelligentsia in the DPRK) also vaguely referred to the struggle of the Korean Workers’ Party against “remnants of bourgeois ideology in literature and arts” and its determination to uproot “art for art’s sake” principle. We will notice that the Soviet authors merely reiterate the particular Party decision without expressing a personal opinion of the problem and without mentioning the names of any “bourgeois reactionary writers”. However, there were some works of Soviet scholars, such as the PhD thesis of A. Taen on North Korean literature, where the author fully sided with the North Korean official line. The stylistics and vocabulary of this work are strongly reminiscent of the propagandistic Korean brochures:

“Some South Korean writers started to promote in veiled form the ideas of cosmopolitanism, bourgeois nationalism, formalism and naturalism in DPRK literature. The proof of this fact is the recent disclosure of an anti-Party group of writers headed by Yim Hwa ... All of these reactionary literati came from South Korea. Some of them, such as Yi T’ae-jun or Ch’oe Myŏng-ik, were in the past strongly influenced by decadence and naturalism. They announced their determination to break with their literary past and claimed their readiness to serve the Korean people but these were in fact just vacuous and false declarations”.

The majority of today’s South Korean academics also perceive the issue of socialist realism to be the major bone of contention in the clash of forces on the North Korean literary scene in 1945-1960. Yun Chae-gŭn and Pak Sang-ch’ŏn, the authors of one of the earliest Seoul accounts of North Korean literature, Pukhan-ŭi hyŏndaemunhak (Contemporary North Korean Literature) in their analysis of the period 1953-1956 leaned upon the official Pyongyang version which links the purges of Yi T’ae-jun, Yim Hwa and Kim Nam-ch’ŏn with “formalism”, “pessimism”, and “defeatism” in their writings. The authors of this book came to the conclusion that the victims of the political campaigns were doomed since they lived in a “society where ideology was an absolute, and literature was ruled by an absolutely powerful ideology which admitted no free thought”.

Thus, the South Korean scholars considered the purged writers to be

31 Ibid., 176.
the victims of a constricting ideology and of the ruling theoretical principles. Sim Wŏn-sŏp in his article “1950 nyŏndaegukhan si kaegwan” (“A Survey of North Korean Poetry of the 1950s”)\textsuperscript{33} argues that Yim Hwa was purged because the political leaders of the country were “oversensitive” to the private and “excessively soft” themes in his poems which contradicted the Party line. Kim Chae-yong in his book *Pukhan munhak-ŭi yŏksajŏk ihae (An Historical Understanding of North Korean Literature)*\textsuperscript{34} concurs with this opinion. This author considers the campaigns against Yim Hwa, Yi T’aen-jun and Kim Nam-ch’ŏn as, first and foremost, a “clash of aesthetic worldviews”. But in Kim Chae-yong’s writings there appears to be a problem of consistency. In another article published in 1994, while expressing his disagreement with the opinion of the defector Yi Ch’ŏl-ju as “overtly anti-Communist”, Kim claimed that the controversy between Ŭm Ho-sŏk and Ki Sŏk-pok in 1952, which preceded the political campaigns, was not a result of political games but an aesthetic dispute over “socialist realism” and “revolutionary romanticism”. However, when speaking about the results of this dispute – “the groundless criticism of the writers” on a massive scale, which made North Korean intellectuals “timid and servile” – Kim could not find any ideological or aesthetic explanation for this: he presumed that these purges might be not of a literary but, indeed, political nature.\textsuperscript{35} Kim Chae-yong, however, candidly admits that his assessment could hardly be deemed objective, since he had read a lot of North Korean critical articles on the subject but none of the works which became the objects of this criticism.\textsuperscript{36}

The perception of political campaigns of the period as the results of ideological and aesthetical disputes in the North Korean literary world remains popular in later South Korean scholarship. Most of the South Korean critics profess the belief that the 1953-1956 purges were provoked by some “ideological deficiencies” in the victims and an inconsistency between their writings and the demands of officialdom. Ch’ŏe Ik-hyŏn, for instance, represents the whole situation as a deep inner conflict of Yim Hwa and Yi T’aen-jun with the existing political system, as a “struggle of believes”\textsuperscript{37}. Ch’ŏe is compassionate towards the victims of this struggle; he disapproves of the DPRK political system, which subordinates literature to ideology, thus denying any capacity for aesthetic variety. However South Korean academics today often observe the events of 1953-1956 from an angle which differs little from that of the North Korean officials. Consider, for instance, a remarkable passage from *50 Years of North Korean History (Pukhan-ŭi 50 nyŏnsa)*. Analysing the literary process in Pyongyang in the 1950s and stressing the role of socialist realist theory at the time, its authors claim that “socialist


\textsuperscript{35} Kim Chae-yong, “Pukhan-ŭi nanmodanggge chakka sukk’ŏng”, 328-364.


\textsuperscript{37} Ch’ŏe Ik-kyŏn, “1956 nyŏn 8 wŏl chongp’a sakŏn chŏnhuŭi pukhan munhak chilsŏ”, 72.
realism not only played the role of an ideological weapon in realising the great task of post-war reconstruction, but was also used in the struggle against the remnants of reactionary bourgeois ideas and the “pure art” tendency of the members of the South Korean Worker’s Party.” 38 Thus the South Korean authors tacitly agree that “remnants of bourgeois ideology” as well as “pure art” tendencies not only existed in North Korean literature between 1945 and 1960, but constituted real problems which required fighting against.

Sin Hyŏn-gi and O Sŏng-ho, the authors of Pukhan Munhaksa (North Korean Literary History) 39, when addressing the issue of the political campaigns of 1953-1956, retell the North Korean version of events without applying any independent critical analysis. Apparently, they, like the authors of the previously cited work, take at face value the official descriptions of the scapegoats of these campaigns as vicious “formalists”, “naturalists”, etc which supposedly contradicted genuine “socialist realism”.

Kim Sŏng-su in his book T’ongil-ui Munhak Pip’yŏng-ui Nonli (Theory of Critique of United Literature) 40 supports this idea even more fervently. In his opinion, there were “serious ideological discrepancies” between the conflicting forces in the North Korean literary world; “formalism”, “revisionism”, “remnants of bourgeois aesthetics”, and other “reactionary trends” with which the Party struggled at the time represented actual threats to socialist realism in the DPRK’s literature and arts. 41 The victorious political campaigns against these tendencies led to a “theoretical deepening” of the theory of socialist realism in North Korea, and this should be appreciated, in Kim Sŏng-su’s opinion, as “the most important success of our literary history of this period”. 42 The influential South Korean scholar Kim Yun-sik also claims that the conflict between Han Sŏr-ya and Yim Hwa over the latter’s anthology Nŏ Ôdie inniゅnya? (Where Are You Now?) was a result of theoretical disparities between the two and led eventually to the endowment of “revolutionary romanticism” in North Korean socialist realism. 43 The South Korean scholar Kim Sŏng-hwan 44 searches for the roots of the principal difference in the literary images and approaches of Yim Hwa and Han Sŏr-ya via the nebulous concept of “Seoulism” and “Pyongyangism” in their mentalities. 

39 Sin Hyŏn-gi and O Sŏng-ho, Pukhan munhaksa.
41 Ibid., 153-186.
42 Ibid., 186
As we can see, all the above-mentioned accounts largely imply that there were actual differences between the ideological or aesthetic positions of the purged writers on the one hand and the official Party line, associated mainly with Han Sŏr-ya, Ŭm Ho-sŏk, An Ham-gwang, etc., on the other. According to this view, which is generally accepted in the dominant discourse of contemporary South Korean academia, these ideological and/or aesthetic differences inspired the political campaigns and purges of intellectuals in North Korea.

This approach is palpable in Scalapino and Lee’s *Communism in Korea*, where the dramatic events of 1955 are largely presented as a struggle between those who supported the “shift from Stalinism” and the die-hard adherents of Stalinist orthodoxy. 45 Scalapino and Lee represent Yim Hwa’s purge as punishment for “expressing his feeling in a manner different from what the state desired” and for “writing in stark, realistic terms about the misery and suffering brought on by the Korean War”. 46

Only a handful of scholars disagree with this dominant view, and it is worth mentioning them here. First, it is Brian Myers who, arguing with Scalapino and Lee about their explanation of the purges of Yim Hwa and Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, reminds us of the blatant double standards in the North Korean literary bureaucracy as well as about the fact that Yim Hwa was no aesthete, but a rather conventional if gifted propagandist. 47 Next I should mention the South Korean scholar Pak T’ae-sang, whose vision of the North Korean literary situation differs partially from the common approach of other contemporary South Korean scholars. In his two books *Pukhan munhak-ŭi hyŏngsang (The Situation in North Korean Literature)* 48 and *Pukhan munhak-ŭi tonghyang (Tendencies in North Korean Literature)*, 49 Pak connects the purges of 1953-1956 in which prominent writers such as Yim Hwa, Yi T’ae-jun, Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, Yi Wŏn-jo, etc were involved, not with their supposed deviations from the official line of “socialist realism”, but, primarily, with the sectarian clashes in the political sphere and the “struggle of inner powers” in Pyongyang officialdom – a vision which all the above-cited South Korean scholars describe as an “oversimplification” of the question. However, referring to the later purges on the North Korean political scene, even Pak T’ae-san tends to take at face value Pyongyang’s official statements. The purges of An Mak, Sŏ Man-il, and Yun Tu-hŏn are explained by the alleged ideological incompatibility of these writers with the Ch’ŏllima movement 50 and

46 Ibid., 890.
47 Brian Myers, *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature*, 82
50 Ch’ŏllima was a major mass mobilization campaign, launched in 1957. The workers were encouraged to work hard, to do their utmost to achieve high (and often unrealistic) production targets.
political line of Kim Il Sung after 1958.\textsuperscript{51} The cases of Pak P’ar-yang and Han Sŏr-ya, who were officially accused in 1963 of “revisionism” and “factionalism”\textsuperscript{52}, Pak T’ae-san attributes to the “insufficient co-operation” of these authors with the official ideological course of Kim Il Sung.\textsuperscript{53}

Yi Ki-pong in his book \textit{Puk-ŭi munhak-kwa yesurin (North Korean Men of Literature and the Arts)}\textsuperscript{54} holds a more unambiguous opinion: for him, there were no principle differences whatsoever between the winners and losers of these campaigns. The very campaigns constituted nothing more than a simple prolongation of clashes between factional interests in the top political world. In general, Yi Ki-pong’s vision of the purges and political campaigns coincides with the opinion of the defector Yi Ch’ol-ju in his above-mentioned book \textit{North Korean Artists}.

\textbf{Approach}

An extensive study of the available material leads me to advance a hypothesis, which I will try to test in this thesis. I would suggest that both orthodox and “ideologically incorrect” literature in North Korea belonged equally to the realm of socialist realism, and that the alleged ideological violations or political deviations of this doctrine have never taken place. To clarify this issue I would like to dwell on the actual meaning of the “socialist realism” doctrine.

\textbf{What is socialist realism?}

The literary doctrine of “socialist realism”, authored by Stalin himself in 1932 as the only possible “creative method”\textsuperscript{55}, was deemed to be obligatory for all aspiring writers in the USSR and eventually in the other countries of the socialist block until the collapse of the Communist system in the late 1980s. The very name of this doctrine implies the depiction of reality from a socialist point of view. But what it was supposed to mean remained unspecified, since, as George Bisztray has noted, “the classics of Marxism-Leninism hardly established any homogeneous aesthetic tradition”.\textsuperscript{56} If we look at the variety of official Soviet definitions of socialist realism in historical perspective, we will notice obvious inconsistencies between their demands. These official interpretations are vague, elusive and prone to almost unlimited variations under the pressure of the current political circumstances. Let’s have a brief look at these diverse definitions.

\textsuperscript{51} Pak T’ae-sang, \textit{Pukhan munhak-ŭi hyŏnsang} , 209

\textsuperscript{52} Kim Yun-sik. \textit{Pukhan munhaksarom} , 100.

\textsuperscript{53} Pak T’ae-sang, \textit{Pukhan munhak-ŭi tonghyang} , 163.

\textsuperscript{54} Yi Ki-pong, \textit{Puk-ŭi munhak-kwa yesurin}.


When referring to socialist realism, scholars, as a rule, resort to the first official interpretation of this term given in August 1934 at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers which formulated the idea as follows: “Socialist realism is the main method of Soviet literature and [literary] criticism. It demands a truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. These qualities must be achieved through the ideological reformation of all the working people, nurturing them in the spirit of socialism”.57

It is difficult to overlook the fact that the obligatory tasks of “ideological reformation of all the working people” and “nurturing them in the spirit of socialism” makes the first part of this definition, namely the “truthful depiction of the reality” practically irrelevant. In fact, the definition prescribes a political mission which every writer, despite the difference in his/her visions of “truthful reality”, are obliged to join. The “truth” is set and is not to be discovered or discussed.

In 1948 Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia (The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia) describes Soviet socialist realist literature as follows: “Soviet literature is the freest literature in the world because it depends on neither class interests, nor racial exclusiveness. It serves the Soviet people and Soviet State freely and naturally. A deep knowledge of the laws of historical development of society, a devotion to the people, to the Communist party and to socialist society makes the writer really free”58. As we can see, the necessary devotion to the Communist Party and socialist society is declared to be the primary condition of “real freedom” for a Soviet writer. Indeed, a writer is not supposed to depend on “class interest” when “class” means to be bourgeois, but his devotion to the lower classes, or “people” is presupposed. The Encyclopaedia cites the characteristic words of A. Zhdanov, then the chief Soviet ideologist, who at the First Congress of Soviet Writers called socialist realist literature “the most ideological, the most advanced, the most revolutionary literature”59.

The following definition of a typical positive socialist realist hero, as discussed in the 1948 Encyclopaedia, proves that the permissible artistic methods and imagery at a Soviet writer’s disposal were, indeed, limited. The positive hero of this literature had to be endowed with such qualities as “…a sense of socialist duty, love of one’s native land, [and] a selfless readiness to devote one’s life to the cause of Communism”.60 In a good heroic image a writer was also obliged to “reproduce the people’s life”; his protagonist “should not be limited by the confines of personal feelings”61. The Encyclopaedia concludes the topic with the characteristic words of Mikhail Kalinin, the


59 Ibid., 1472.

60 Ibid., 1474.

61 Ibid., 1475.
prominent Soviet politician of Stalin era: "A socialist realist must depict reality, living reality without embellishment. But he must also inspire the development of human thought". 62

As we can see, the definitions of socialist realism given in Stalinist times steered a writer in an austere, militant direction. He/she was supposed to depict life "realistically", "without embellishment" (which, however, did not mean without proper ideological decoration lest it sounded not "inspirational" enough); a "typical hero" should be a zealous fighter for the revolutionary cause of Communism and not indulge in personal dilemmas.

However, in the definition of socialist realism given in 1957 in a new edition of the Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia the rigid Stalinist formulations of the earlier period are substituted with more "human" images: "The literature of socialist realism combines sobriety and romanticism, reality and flights of fancy into the future. Revolutionary ideas are the soil for revolutionary romanticism". 63 As the major principles of socialist realism the new encyclopaedia names "historical optimism", "party spirit", "popular spirit", and "socialist humanism". 64

It is easy to notice that the new definition reflected radical changes in the Soviet political atmosphere after Stalin’s death. Khruschev’s reforms of Soviet society vitalised the society and ushered in a renaissance of the romanticisation of the Communist ideology, akin to the perspective of the early years following the 1917 Revolution. References to "humanism" and "romanticism", even if they were spiced with remarks about "revolution" and the "party", were the hallmarks of this new, more relaxed cultural atmosphere of "thaw".

The tendency to a further "humanisation" of Communist ideas is seen in the definition of the Malaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia (The Shorter Soviet Encyclopaedia) in 1960, which reads: "The protagonist of our literature and art became the man of labour. He accepts his dependence on society like the necessity to struggle for the victory of Communism". 65 As we can see, the problem of personal freedom is discussed here. The authors tried to justify "the dependence on society" with the higher moral imperative of Communist faith, not to take it for granted, as was the case in Stalin’s time. The definition also ascribes to socialist realist literature a "concrete historical approach to the "eternal" concepts of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, justice and injustice, freedom and slavery". 66 Stalin’s epoch, as a rule, rejected "eternal" topics as "reactionary pure arts" attributes.

62 Ibid., 1465.


64 Ibid., 181.


66 Ibid., 801.
The further trends to “humanise” the official Communist discourse are visible in the 1965 Nobel speech of Mikhail Sholokhov. This leading official Soviet writer at the time formulated the essence of socialist realism as follows: "I speak for the realism that bears the pathos of the renovation of life, the reconstruction of life in favour of Man. I speak, of course, of realism, which we call socialist realism now. It is original because it reflects a worldview which rejects both contemplation and alienation from reality. It propagates the struggle for the progress of mankind, it offers the opportunity to comprehend the goals dear to millions of people and to light up the pathway of struggle".67 As we can see here, the Nobel Prize winner is trying to include socialist realism in a world-wide intellectual tradition. Unlike his predecessors of the 1930s or 1940s, Sholokhov does not proclaim the Soviet socialist realism to be “the most advanced literature” which aggressively demands “the ideological reformation of all working people, nurturing them in the spirit of socialism” – instead, he modestly speaks only of its appealing “originality”. Neither “Party spirit” nor “class consciousness” are mentioned here – instead, the task of socialist realism is formulated as a struggle for the common “progress of mankind”, for unspecified “goals dear to millions of people”.

The formulation of socialist realism given in Kratkaia Literaturnaia Entsiklopediya (A Short Encyclopaedia of Literature) in 1972 reflects the new changes in Soviet society. It was the time when the renewed romantic perception of Communist ideas of the early 1960s started to wane and was soon to be replaced by thinly veiled cynicism towards official ideals. The new definition of socialist realism still exploits the standard image of “Party spirit”, but surrounds it with verbose and ambiguous demagogy: “A conscious Party spirit, or the conscious assertion of ideas of progress, is becoming an integral part of socialist realism. The concept of party spirit manifests itself in different forms: as a conception of man, some features of whom are approved of or rejected; as a comprehension of the process of life, it’s leading historical powers; as an estimation of the historical role of the people. To summarise, it takes the form of the means by which an author approaches his aesthetic goal. The Party spirit of his works is clarified and crystallised in the process of struggle for this goal, for its aesthetic assertion. Every time it is fresh and at times controversial, depending on the different historical situation and on the degree of penetration. The concept of party spirit does not mean at all a stiff, unchangeable, ready-made view of life’s problems in a piece of art”.68 The difference with the first militant definitions of “socialist realism” is obvious here: the very declaration that the Party’s ideas could be “sometimes controversial” or “depending on the different political situation” would inevitably lead an author to the GULAG in Stalin’s time.

The Stalinist idea of “typicality” was also transformed beyond recognition: “A realistic depiction exposes the social life in its development, basing itself on not only

---


68 Kratkaia Literaturnaia Entsiklopediya [Short Encyclopaedia of Literature], Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1972, 97.
the dominant, but also the important trends of life". Notice the ambivalence in the criteria, the somewhat uncertain intonation and a readiness to include practically any work inside the shabby old form of socialist realism.

The definition of socialist realism given in Sovetskii Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar' (The Soviet Encyclopaedic Dictionary) in 1986 mirrored this further blurring of socialist realist criteria in the pre-Gorbachev USSR. This was a time when Communist ideas ceased to play any significant role in the Soviet mindset. The thinly disguised signs of social critique, easily discernable by astute Soviet readers, appeared more and more frequently in Soviet literature and became the principal measure of the popularity of a particular literary piece. Public interest also moved drastically in the direction of foreign literature, which was widely read in translation. However die-hard servants of the regime, the creators of the boring "industrial novels" or "Great War prose", still existed in Soviet literature. Yet even these "dinosaurs", well paid by the Writer’s Union bureaucracy, did not raise the issue of Communism any more.

The watery definition of socialist realism given by the Soviet Encyclopaedic Dictionary in 1986 reflects this dubious and faltering state of Soviet “socialist realist” literature in its final years: "Socialist realism is an historically open system of artistic form. Its main principles are popular spirit, Party spirit and socialist humanism. Its aesthetic platform includes realistic origins, which depends on the depth of objective comprehension, and creative origins, or romanticism, or the pathos of the subjective activity of a creator.... Socialist realism is an aesthetic expression of a conscious socialist conception of the world and of man. It is a depiction of life in the light of socialist ideals".70

As we can see, the new definition contained passages which would be unthinkable in the 1960s, let alone the 1930s, such as “open system of artistic form”, “the pathos of the subjective activity of a creator”, etc. At the same time, it still included ideas and images from the old ritualistic propaganda such as “Party spirit” and “conscious socialist conception”.

It is noteworthy that the range of the above-cited definitions proposes no common artistic conventions, canons or forms for socialist realism. All official demands in this respect are strikingly inconsistent. American scholar G. Bisztray remarked on the absence of practical artistic “criteria set for a socialist realist creative method”.71 The prominent Western scholar Katerina Clark in her book The Soviet Novel, History as Ritual72 made an attempt to figure out the literary conventions of Soviet socialist realism through the analysis of some of its “patristic texts” (Sholokhov, Fadeev, Furmanov, Ostrovsky, etc) and the extrapolation of the features of these texts to other

---

69 Ibid., 93-94.


71 George Bisztray, Marxist Models of Literary Realism, 45.

Soviet works. Clark’s approach is, indeed, valuable and original. Nonetheless, for all its academic merits, it has its limitations.

To start with, under the banner “patristic texts” she includes “a core group of novels that are cited with sufficient regularity to be considered a canon”. In Clark’s opinion these books represented actual “obraztsy” (“exemplars”), which were supposed “to guide the writers in their future works”. Certainly the works which Clark perceives as exemplary were officially recognised and may even be extolled as works to follow and emulate. The problem was, however, that the status of official classic did not make those works real exemplars for colleagues in terms of literary conventions, just as the customary ritualistic calls of the Writers Union officials to the members of the Union “to learn from the classics of Russian literature” did not turn the poems of Pushkin into “patristic texts” of Soviet literature. As in every sphere of Soviet life, there was a considerable distance between the official slogans and real policy. For all the official calls to “learn from Virgin Land” it is difficult to find any real attempt to emulate the methods and conventions of Sholokhov’s novel even in the literature of the 1930s, let alone in the texts of later eras.

The primary reason for this phenomenon was probably that the books which Katerina Clark defined as “patristic texts” presented poor material for emulation. In terms of literary conventions they did not constitute a stable and consistent canon. Different periods introduced different artistic constituents, and the Soviet literature of the 1930s in terms of aesthetic rules, differed from the literature of 1950s, not to mention the 1960s or the 1980s; the features of the “master plot” or prototypical heroes which Clark found in the texts of Furmanov or Gorky, even if they could feature in some contemporary literature, were hardly relevant to the later socialist realist works. For example, Gorky’s favourite theme of eternal struggle or Ostrovsky’s straightforward eulogies to the “imminent era of Communism”, had they appeared in even the most orthodox pieces of Soviet “socialist realism” of the 1960s-70s, would have raised a smile at best. Though established Soviet writers routinely paid lip-service to the “great epics” of the Civil War written by Fadeev or Furmanov, none of them actually used these novels as practical guides for the depiction of the “Great Patriotic War” in later periods.

Secondly, even within a single historical period, the patristic texts were not artistically congruent with each other. The “spontaneity-consciousness dialectic” which Katerina Clark suggests as an inseparable part of the socialist realist “master plot”, while traceable in the works of Fadeev or Ostrovsky, hardly existed in the works of such a profoundly Stalinist and decorated writer as Vera Panova with her plain domestic motives, for example. The exemplary works of Sholokhov (Quiet Flows the Don (1928-1940), Virgin Land (1931-1960)), were characterised by a degree of sensuality which was incomparable to other similarly “patristic” works such as the classic texts of Furmanov, Fadeev or Ostrovskii. Thus, with all their variety and mutual inconsistency the “patristic texts” hardly offered any general literary conventions or artistic patterns of socialist realist literature.

73 Ibid., 4, 261-263.
Speaking of literary conventions of socialist realism, G. Lukacs suggested that in terms of form, socialist realism rejected modernism and followed the steps of the bourgeois novel, since “socialist realism required new content, but not new forms”.74 Agreeing with this point, I would like to stress that it did not always mean an absolute denial of the new forms, as the Soviet practice proves. The verses of the definitely “patriotic” Soviet poet Maiakovskii or the much-praised Robert Rozhdestvensky contained many experiments in form, while the works of their other prominent colleagues in socialist realism remained more traditional.

In my opinion, in order to comprehend socialist realism we should not approach this doctrine in terms of common literary conventions or artistic forms at all. This literature was unified by another common principle which was formulated long before the appearance of the term, in the article of V. Lenin “Party Organisation and Party Literature” (“Partiinaiia organizatsiia i partiinaiia literatura”) (1905). In this article, which later was extolled as the theoretical foundation of the Communist literary policy in the USSR, the future leader of Soviet Russia formulated his vision of literature in a quite unequivocal way:

“Literature... cannot be an individual undertaking.... Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, “a cog and a screw” of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organised, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.”75

As we can see, Lenin boldly defined the primary function of literature as “a cog and a screw”, i.e. an ideological tool under Party leadership.

This demand of Lenin for literature to serve the current Party’s needs as a didactic and propagandistic tool was reflected in the speech of Andrei Zhdanov at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. The prominent Party official candidly claimed that socialist realist literature (which he claimed was the “most advanced and richest in the whole world”) needed no new specific forms – it could borrow them from previous epochs. The main, really novel thing about this literature was that it was supposed to be “consciously tendentious” and depict “correct” protagonists.76 Though in Western intellectual circles Zhdanov’s speech was later rebuked as too narrow-minded and theoretically unpolished, in fact it expressed the major point of socialist realism clearer than the work of any sophisticated literary theorist. Indeed, Lenin’s idea of the transformation of literature into a handmaiden of the ruling ideology was fully realised in the first Communist state and became a cornerstone of the theory and practice of the “socialist realist” doctrine elsewhere. If we look again at the official definitions of socialist realism we can easily notice that despite disagreements about

76 Cited in the work by George Bittray, Marxist Models of Literary Realism, 43-45.
artistic form and canons, they all demonstrate a consistent and transparent ambition of Communist power to hold literary matters under strict control and to make literature serve the current and ever-changing demands of the regime. I am inclined to agree with the definition of socialist realism given by American scholar Marshal Pihl in his article “Engineers of the human soul: North Korean literature today”: “The doctrine of socialist realism, a Soviet aesthetic canon, holds that literature may not be a simple “realistic” or “naturalistic” reproduction of life but must describe reality as the party defines it”.77 I would simply add – as the Party defines reality in a particular historical moment. The “patristic texts” of Soviet literature perfectly demonstrate this quality. Be they Fadeev’s romantic sagas about the Civil War, Sholokhov’s sensual depictions of life in a reforming village, Panova’s simple domestic tales, or the faceless “industrial novels” of the 1970s-1980s, all of these texts show the extraordinary ability of their authors to sense the contemporary political needs and force the complicated reality of Soviet life into the narrow confines of the current political demands. This was the primary feature which rendered these texts socialist realist classics. And in this particular respect, these novels were, indeed, exemplars for the average Soviet writer. In practice, the primary concern for Soviet writers was to choose the subject carefully, and this certainly overrode concerns about artistic method or imagery. This general aspiration of the Soviet intellectual world was maintained by a well-designed system of sticks-and-carrots which in the Soviet context took form of, to borrow E. Gromov’s expression, “warrants and orders”.

Thus, to my understanding, socialist realism is not about form – it is about content. Socialist realism is literature which is designed to serve the practical interests of a state ruled by a Leninist Party. So let us take a look at North Korean literature from this perspective.

**Socialist realism in North Korea**

As Scalapino and Lee put it, “it is extremely doubtful that Karl Marx, were he resurrected, would view the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as a state drawn from his inspiration or as a true socialist society by his definition. Even Lenin would find it difficult to accept as legitimate certain cardinal elements of the prevailing creed and structure of Kim Il Sung’s polity.”78 However, most would agree that the DPRK shares the vital qualities of a Communist state, such as a single Party structure, state ownership of industrial enterprises, a centrally planned economy, mass participation, elitist control, etc.79 What we see in North Korea is still a state controlled by Marxism-Leninism but in a North Korean setting. While the ideology of this state is implemented in different ways and relies upon different myths it is still basically the same at its core.

The same can be said of North Korean literature which, following the Soviet pattern, developed a rudimentary understanding of “socialist realism”. The basic social function of North Korean literature remained the same political and utilitarian one,

---

78 Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea*, 1296.
79 Ibid., 1297.
similar to the functions of literatures of other states, which had embarked upon the Communist path. All recognised North Korean writers demonstrated an unquestionable loyalty to the current political climate, a complete readiness to fulfil openly propagandistic tasks defined by the Party and a total engagement in the political process of the North Korean Communist state.

In this regard, North Korean intellectuals even overrode their Soviet counterparts. While the Soviet authors of “patristic texts”, such as Sholokhov, sometimes deviated from the obligatory political course and included ambiguities and contradictory sidelines in their writings, the North Korean literature of the 1940s and 1950s allowed for no such deviations. In my opinion, this was a reflection of the general atmosphere of North Korean society which, from the very beginning, appeared to be more regimented and rigidly controlled than the Soviet one—and even in some opinions than Maoist China.  

Indeed, as Brian Myers noted, in terms of artistic methods North Korean literature sometimes differed from the widely proclaimed Soviet “model” novels. Yet, these different North Korean artistic patterns served the same interests of the ruling Communist elite as Soviet literature did for the Soviet elite. The general paradigm of Pyongyang literature did not significantly deviate from the Soviet originals. The set of social idylls and the picture of the world in North Korean literature are strongly reminiscent of that of the Soviet prototype. The alterations, which were undertaken by the Pyongyang propagandists, represented, in fact, an adaptation of the Soviet models to the North Korean mentality, traditions and particular political circumstances.

For all these reasons I see no grounds for excluding North Korean literature from this literary-cum-political movement of “socialist realism”.

**Structure**

The present thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter is devoted to the implantation of the patterns of “socialist realism” as a part of the broad Soviet influence in the first decade of the DPRK and the development of these patterns in later North Korean society.

The first steps of the North Korean literary policy were marked by the wholesale imitation of the Soviet Stalinist models of the era. This was an inseparable part of the established political pattern of the time—the implantation of the Soviet institutions into every sphere of Korean social, political and cultural life. As Scalapino and Lee noted, “…in cultural as well as in political terms, this was the Soviet era, with Russian literature, Russian movies, and the Russian language featured everywhere”.

However, one should not envisage this period one-dimensionally, as forcible Soviet cultural occupation. Certainly, the Soviet policymakers, while widely promoting their cultural and political patterns on North Korean soil, assumed that this tactic would

---

80 Ibid., 845.

81 Ibid., 375.
guarantee stability in the North and ensure its subordinate position in the Soviet-led camp. However, the DPRK leader Kim Il Sung also had his own reasons to support a pro-Soviet course for the North Korean literary policy. Kim seemed to understand that Soviet literary patterns, necessarily imbued with Stalinist content, could equip the Korean intellectuals with guidelines until national standards in literature could be worked out. Aiming at the creation of a Stalinist society in Korea, Kim readily adopted Stalin’s proven methods of handling intellectuals. For this reason during the first years of the Soviet occupation the North Korean never tired of stressing the importance of “learning from the Soviets”. Even if he had any ethnocentric propensities at the time he did not reveal them.

In his 24 May 1946 speech at the “Meeting of Propagandists of the Provincial People’s Committees, Political Parties and Social Organizations, Cultural Workers and Artists in North Korea”, the DPRK leader described the Korean writers as “soldiers on the cultural front” (which was, in fact, a paraphrase of Stalin’s idiom “engineers of the human soul” in his reference to Soviet writers), summoned them “to go to the masses” and particularly emphasized the need for the “absorption of the Soviet culture”. In 1955 Pak Chong-sik cited an even more forthright statement of the Great Leader which he had made in 1946: “We must keep in mind that only (TG’s emphasis) through learning the progressive art and literature of the Soviet Union can we construct a glorious North Korean culture”.

For a while the Soviet influence was successfully conducted through various channels in the DPRK. However, in the mid-1950s the political perspectives of both states visibly diverged. While the new Soviet leadership was carefully moving towards de-Stalinization, Kim Il Sung opted for a much more restrictive version of state socialism. The DPRK leader strove to escape from Soviet control, and a nationalist rhetoric, even if sincerely believed by its producers, emerged as a useful political tool in this process.

The first signs of these coming changes appeared in a famous speech of Kim Il Sung delivered on 28 December 1955 at the conference of KWP agitators and propagandists. In this speech the Great Leader criticized Koreans for neglecting their own “glorious traditions” and the preponderance of all things “foreign”, which in the North Korean context meant, of course, things Soviet. The Great Leader pointed out, for instance, that in Korean schools there are portraits of Pushkin and Maiakovskii, but no portrait of a Korean writer, so the would-be Great Leader righteously asked: “How

---


83 Pak Chong-sik, “Chosŏn munhak-e issŏsŏ-ŭi ssobet’ŭ munhak-ŭi yŏnghyang” [The Influence of Soviet Literature in Korean Literature], in Haebanghu 10 nyŏngan-ŭi chosŏn munhak [Korean Literature During the First Decade After Liberation]. Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng chi’ulp’ansa, 1955, 417. No such statement was found in the available publications of Kim Il Sung’s works. The remarks were most probably deleted from the later editions when relations with the USSR turned sour in the late 1950s.
can our children learn about national pride?" 84 The speech announced the end of the Soviet era in North Korean culture.

The post-1955 growing rift with Moscow and the increasingly nationalist bias of North Korea’s official ideology meant that the once glorified connections with Moscow and Soviet-originated cultural patterns were to be downplayed or denied. Nonetheless, a large number of stereotypes, which came to Korea in the late 1940s from the USSR, have survived the de-Russification and remained important parts of the North Korean literary traditions up to this day. Many Soviet socialist realist conventions were strengthened and readjusted to suit the new needs of the North Korean Stalinist state.

I will concentrate on two important and relatively understudied channels of the Soviet intellectual influence, which engulfed Korea in the 1940s and 1950s: the distribution of Soviet fiction in the nascent DPRK and “Ssoryŏn kihænggi”, or travelogues written by North Korean intellectuals who visited the Soviet Union in 1946-1955 as members of specially arranged official delegations.

Though the travelogues were supposed to be documentary reports, in fact these works created by prominent North Korean writers fit perfectly the prescriptions for socialist realism. These writings presented the DPRK intellectuals with one of their first exercises in political servility towards the new power, the first test of loyalty to the demands of their new regime, and North Korean writers passed this test with flying colours. Besides, the Soviet excursions of North Korean intellectuals in 1946-1955 had more far-reaching consequences for the future development of the socialist realist doctrine in the DPRK. Through the depiction of Soviet reality from a particular strict angle, these writings promoted certain models for the DPRK culture and set explicit patterns for North Korean fiction and poetry. In this respect, the travelogues greatly amplified the effect of the translated Soviet literature.

I will base my analysis of North Korean travelogues on the original versions of four books: Yi T’ae-jun’s Ssoryŏn kihæng (A Trip to the Soviet Union) (1947), 85 Yi Ki-yŏng’s Widaehan saenghwar-ŭl ch’angjoohanŭn ssoryŏn (The USSR Creates a Great Life) (1952) 86 and Kongsanjuŭi t’aeyang-ŭn pit’namda (The Sun of Communism is Shining) (1954) 87, and K’ŭnak’un uŭi (The Great Friendship) (1954), which is a collection of the works of six North Korean writers (Min Pyŏng-kyun, Yi Puk-myŏng,

84 Kim Il Sung, Sasang saop-esŏ kyojaajuìwa hyŏngsikjuu-ŭl hwangnip hal te taehayô [About the Eradication of Doctrinism and Formalism and the Establishment of Chuch’e], Pyongyang: Chosŏn Nodongdang ch’ulp’ansa, 1960, 6.
86 Yi Ki-yŏng, Widaehan saenghwar-ŭl ch’angjoohanŭn ssoryŏn [The USSR Creates a Great Life], Pyongyang: Chosso munhwahyŏphoe, 1952.
87 Yi Ki-yŏng, Kongsanjuŭi t’aeyang-ŭn pit’namda [The Sun of Communism is Shining], Pyongyang: Chosso ch’ulp’ansa, 1954.
Yun Tu-hŏn, Hong Kŏn, Kang Hyo-sun, Kim Sŭn-sŏk) who visited the Soviet Union at
different times.\(^{88}\)

Through these texts I will trace the major images and patterns of Soviet "socialist
realism", which were acquired by the North Korean propagandists in this period. In
particular, I will concentrate on the Soviet pattern of the proper social place of a
Communist writer, the Soviet cultural images and clichés, and the social idylls of the
Soviet style. I will investigate how these patterns were introduced and ingrained into
the North Korean discourse and how they were changed during the later decades.

The second chapter considers the activity of a "living source" of socialist realist
promotion in North Korea – the Soviet Korean faction and in particular, the figure of
the poet Cho Ki-ch’ŏn who became the founding father of North Korean literature.

One of the major influences on early North Korean politics was exercised by the
Soviet Koreans who arrived in North Korea soon after Liberation. Most of them were
trusted Soviet party members, often with a good education and useful experiences.
Their task was to promote Communist ideas and assist the formation of various
institutions of the nascent North Korean state that would be pro-Soviet if not
completely Communist.\(^{89}\)

Over the first decade of North Korean history, the Soviet Koreans held major
positions in the North Korean establishment: according to Scalapino and Lee, in 1945-
1951 "they occupied as many as two hundred key posts during this period".\(^{90}\) The
formation of North Korean literature and the arts as crucial propaganda tools of the
Communist state was among the vital political missions entrusted to the Soviet
Koreans.

Being people of Soviet upbringing and mentality, but with a strong sense of
belonging to the Korean community and a good command of the Korean language, the
Russianised Koreans exercised a profound influence on North Korean literary discourse
in the late 1940s. To literature and the arts the Soviet Koreans brought new standards of
political behaviour, new norms of interaction and, of course, new methods of creative
work. A majority of the Soviet Koreans who dealt with literature and the arts were
employed as political supervisors, officials in the ideological bureaucracy or as
journalists in the official press (and here one should mention Ki Sŏk-pok, Chŏng Yul
and Pak Ch’ang-ok in particular). Some of them, however, produced works of fiction
and poetry themselves: Chŏng Ryul, Kang T’ae-su, Chŏng Tong-hyŏk, Yim Ha, Kim
Il-yŏng and others are good examples of this phenomenon.\(^{91}\) A particularly crucial
impact on the nascent intellectual world of North Korea was made by the Soviet

\(^{88}\) K’ünak’un uŭi (Ssoryŏn kihăengi pij) [The Great Friendship (Travels to the USSR)],
Pyongyang: Choson chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1954.

\(^{89}\) Regarding Soviet Koreans in the initial period of the DPRK, see Andrei Lankov, From Stalin
to Kim Il Sung, the Formation of North Korea 1945-1960, New Brunswick, New Jersey:

\(^{90}\) Scalapino and Lee, Communism in Korea, 383.

\(^{91}\) Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
Koreans who worked at the Chosŏn sinmun newspaper which was published by the Soviet military in Korea. These Soviet writers and literary-ideological bureaucrats maintained close connections with the then powerful “Soviet faction” in the North Korean leadership. In the late 1940s this was a powerful political group and its sponsorship as well as open support of the Soviet authorities greatly contributed to the rise of the Soviet Korean authors to prominence in the North. However, the very same connections which made them so powerful in the late 1940s eventually led to their dramatic demise in the mid-1950s when Kim Il Sung began to distance himself from his former sponsors in Moscow. Most of these people either disappeared in purges or fled Korea for Russia. Their exploits did not win much official recognition after the mid-1950s. Nonetheless, they were instrumental in introducing the conventions of socialist realism and Stalinist literary politics to the DPRK.

Of all the Soviet Koreans who dealt in any way with the affairs of literature and culture, one person held a special place. This was Cho Ki-ch’ŏn (1913-1951), the Soviet Korean who is often perceived as a founding father of North Korean poetry. This chapter will largely deal with this remarkable figure and his impact on the North Korean literary politics of the late 1940s and early 1950s. I have tried to filter out from his figure various common scholarly misconceptions, add some previously unknown data regarding his life and activity and reflect on Cho’s impact and legacy on North Korean socialist realism.

The third and fourth chapters of the thesis analyse the lives and activities of two representative personalities of the nascent North Korean literary world, Yi Ki-yŏng and Yi T’ae-jun, within the political context of the era. The fates of both writers colourfully illustrate the primary political implications of North Korean “socialist realism”.

Even a cursory glance at the North Korean literary magazines published in 1945-1960 confirms that the Pyongyang literary pantheon was changing constantly. In the maelstrom of purges and personal clashes that engulfed the North Korean literary world in those years, numerous figures emerged and reached great prominence only to disappear after a few short years. The most prominent literary officials and prolific writers such as Yim Hwa, Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, An Mak, Song Yong, Han Sŏr-ya, Ch’oe Myŏng-ik or Sŏ Man-il, whose positions at first appeared unassailable, shared a common and tragic fate. Only a few intellectuals could survive the political turmoil of the formative years of North Korean regime, and Yi Ki-yŏng (1895-1984) was certainly one of those few.

His career would appear exceptional. Entering Pyongyang’s literary world in 1945 as a well-known leftist writer (his major pre-Liberation novel Native Land (Kohyang) (1933-34) was the only bestseller ever produced by a KAPF writer and had been republished in Korea five times before Liberation) Yi Ki-yŏng was soon transformed into a “founding father of Korean proletarian literature”, a respected standing which he retained to the end of his life in 1982. His administrative career in

---

92 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 28.
93 V.I. Ivanova, Li Gien: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo, 44.

24
North Korea was consistently successful. During his 35 years spent in the office of Chairman of the Central Committee of the North Korean-Soviet Friendship Society and other important official positions, Yi Ki-yŏng enjoyed material well-being, entertaining trips overseas, free and superior Soviet sanatoriums, high quality medical services and other privileges which corresponded to his high official status. Yi’s professional ambitions appear to have been satisfied as well. Not only were his novels, which were written after Liberation, printed in numerous copies and met with a eulogizing chorus of North Korean critics, but also his pre-1945 works were also constantly republished and lauded as the first major œuvre of Korean socialist realism. In this regard they were not unlike Gorky’s *Mother* which, while written well before the Communist Revolution of 1917, was included in the Stalinist “socialist realism” canon as its earliest “exemplary work”. Up to the present day, Yi Ki-yŏng’s works have constituted the core of the North Korean literary canon and are still included in textbooks in North Korea. Thus, for all practical purposes, Yi Ki-yŏng represented an example of consummate success in the North Korean literary world.

On the other hand, the fate of Yi T’ae-jun (1904 - after 1969?) appeared quite the opposite. A bright literary talent whose pre-Liberation popularity was unquestioned, Yi T’ae-jun in 1946 willingly went to the North in order to partake in the creation of a “new and happy life” and turned his pen to the service of the nascent Communist regime as yet another “soldier on the cultural front”. However, unlike his successful colleague Yi Ki-yŏng, Yi T’ae-jun failed to adjust to the political reality of the North Korean literary world and was purged and anathematized by the very regime he so fervently eulogized. Thus, his North Korean activity represented a quintessential case of “failure” in the Pyongyang literary/bureaucratic environment.

The logical explanation of Yi Ki-yŏng and Yi T’ae-jun’s rise or fall respectively would be the compatibility/incompatibility of the writers with the Communist ideology and the domineering principles of “socialist realism”, or the “orthodox”/“heretic” natures of their literary and social activities. This explanation would appear even more reasonable given the pre-Liberation circumstances of the writers. While Yi Ki-yŏng belonged to the so-called “proletarian literature camp”, Yi T’ae-jun positioned himself as a devotee of “pure art”. However, a comparative analysis of the pre-Liberation works of Yi Ki-yŏng and Yi T’ae-jun clearly demonstrates that the actual ideological differences between Yi Ki-yŏng’s KAPF works and the allegedly “pure” writings of Yi T’ae-jun were surprisingly small, no matter what both sides claimed about themselves and their opponents. On the one hand, Yi Ki-yŏng could hardly serve as a homogeneous example of Communist orthodoxy. Like the other representatives of

---

94 According to Sŏng Hye-rang, a sister of Yi Ki-yŏng’s daughter-in-law, in 1950s Yi Ki-yŏng’s house was “the richest in Pyongyang”. The author explains this by the privileged position Yi Ki-yŏng enjoyed as the most prominent writer of the DPRK, his chairmanship of the Soviet-Korean Friendship Society and his frequent visits to the Soviet Union which gave him access to much-coveted foreign luxury items. (See: Sŏng Hye-rang, *T’ungnamu chip* [A House Covered with Wisteria], Seoul: Chisik nara, 2000, 362).

95 For example, see: *Chosŏn munhaksa* [The History of North Korean Literature], Pyongyang: Sahoe kwahak ch’ulp’ansa, 1994, Vol.10 “Haebanghu p’yŏn” [After Liberation]: 139-158.
“proletarian literature” of Korea, he was much less “proletarian” or Marxist than was claimed. On the other hand, a closer investigation of Yi T’ae-jun’s case confirms that the “pure literature” which he was supposed to represent was not completely divorced from social concerns and political questions. While neither can be described as thoroughly Marxist, often it is not clear whose works adhere more closely to the leftist perspective – the supposedly “proletarian” writings of Yi Ki-yŏng or the “purist” prose of Yi T’ae-jun.

As for the post-Liberation activity of the two, both Yi Ki-yŏng and Yi T’ae-jun proved to be perfect “soldiers on the cultural front”. The works they produced coincided equally with the announced Party demands. However, the relationships of the writers with the contemporary North Korean literary bureaucracy were remarkably different, and my understanding is that this was the primary factor which determined the so vastly different fates of Yi Ki-yŏng and Yi T’ae-jun.

In the relevant chapters I will undertake a comparative analysis of these both figures in terms of their belonging to the “socialist realist camp”, investigate their experiences, worldviews and works, scrutinize the reasons for their rise/fall and examine their legacy for the development of North Korean literature.

The fifth chapter of the thesis is devoted to the political campaigns of 1945-1955 and the role of the North Korean critics in them. Though it was implied that the pursuit of “ideological purity” of North Korean “socialist realism” was the major goal of these campaigns, in fact these campaigns were expressions of a specific political phenomenon in the North Korean literary world: clashes between competing factions which North Korean intellectuals had created in alliance with particular Party leaders and their coteries. These blocs of writers mostly represented extensions of the factions active within the Party’s top leadership. These clashes were exacerbated by the personal rivalries, mutual animosity and long-standing envy among North Korean writers.

Since the late 1940s, three main groups struggled for domination in the North Korean literary scene. The first one included former members of the KAPF (Yi Ki-yŏng, Song Yŏng, Pak Se-yŏng etc) and some litterateurs of North Korean origin (Hong Sun-ch’ŏl, Han Hyo etc). This group was led by Han Sŏr-ya, who relied upon Kim Il Sung and the so-called “Guerrilla faction” for support. Then, there was the Soviet Korean faction headed by the vice-chairman of the NKFLA Cho Ki-ch’ŏn and included Soviet Koreans and a few other writers such as Yi T’ae-jun. They centered around the Ministry of Propaganda and the newspaper Nodong sinmun, which was dominated by Soviet Koreans. This group enjoyed the support of highly positioned Soviet-Korean officials such as vice-premier Ho Ka-i and Pak Ch’ang-ok, the then chairman of the Central Committee’s Propaganda and Agitation Department. The third faction included intellectuals belonging to the South Korean Workers Party, or Domestic Communists. This group of writers was led by Yim Hwa and was actively

96 About factional struggle in the DPRK see: Andrei Lankov, From Stalin to Kim Il Sung, 77-154.
supported by Pak Hồng-yǒng, the leader of the South Korean underground. This party of Southerners (Domestic), being less numerous and influential, tended to cooperate with the Soviet Koreans against the ex-KAPF members, who were the strongest of the three.

Every faction deemed itself the sole legitimate representative of the Korean Communist literary tradition, pushing forward their real or imagined exclusive attributes. Ex-KAPF members posed as the ultimate and heroic bearers of the Korean revolutionary literary tradition, while doing their best to downplay their rivals as “outsiders” (the Soviet Koreans) or “traitors to the revolutionary cause” (the Southerners, most of whom had collaborated with the colonial regime in the early 1940s). It did not matter that Han Sŏr-ya came to the KAPF much later than the actual founding father of the organization, the Southerner Yim Hwa or that during the mass apostasy of the colonial period, the KAPF’s members demonstrated no more visceral fortitude than Kim Nam-ch’ŏn (in fact, under the colonial authorities’ pressure “by 1940 all KAPF veterans had renounced the revolutionary cause”).

The other faction, the Soviet Koreans, emphasized their Soviet Russian origin. Indeed, their Soviet roots and experiences gave them an actual advantage over their “indigenous” colleagues. Most of the Soviet Koreans were graduates of Russian universities and enjoyed a higher educational level and broader intellectual horizons than their North Korean fellows. In Korea, with its ingrained Confucian respect for education, this was immensely important, and the Soviet Koreans used this advantage in the factional struggles. They strove to position themselves as the only true bearers of the sacred knowledge of “real Communism” and thus the only legitimate arbiters of what was right or wrong in the North Korean arts and literature.

As for the Southerners, their leader Yim Hwa, who enjoyed his standing as a talented and popular Communist poet and critic, strove to gather the young intellectuals around him, while deriding his old enemy Han Sŏr-ya for an obvious lack of artistic achievement. Yim’s reputation as a prominent poet and critic was, indeed, unquestioned – to the extent that Han Hyo, a critic who belonged to Han’s faction and a relative of Han Sŏr-ya, felt compelled to plagiarize Yim’s History of Korean Literature.

These groups competed for political influence and privileges, and ostensibly literary discussions became their major weapon. Their obedience to their superiors and impertinence towards their opponents were complemented by the inclusion of the

---

97 Pak Nam-su, Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn-ŭi pukhan mundan, 104-105.
98 For some reason the Chinese Communists faction, which was quite powerful in Pyongyang politics and included a number of renowned intellectuals (like Kim Tu-bong, the titular head of state in the DPRK), was not represented in literary sphere.
99 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 29.
100 Interview with Chŏng Ryul.
102 Pak Nam-su, Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn-ŭi pukhan mundan, 114.
pragmatic interests of the faction for which the critics stood, and thus their own practical interests. Long-term mutual animosity was released to wage the ugly sectarian warfare.

In conclusion I will summarise the major findings of my study and compare the Soviet and North Korean “socialist realisms” in terms of their commonalities and differences.
Chapter 1

SOVIET MODELS AND THE FIRST STEPS OF SOCIALIST REALISM IN NORTH KOREA

Soviet Literature in Korea

One of the reasons why the Soviet literary patterns were quickly and successfully introduced in the North Korean intellectual world during the “Soviet era” was the fact that they were not completely alien to the indigenous Korean intellectual atmosphere. The early Soviet literature was relatively well known in pre-Liberation Korea where it enjoyed a measure of popularity among educated Korean readers. This popularity owed much to the authority of its predecessor, the classic Russian literature which began to spread into Korea from the 1890s and in the colonial period came to be widely admired by educated Koreans. Many scholars believe that the perception of Russian literature by Korean readers differed from that of the Western public: Korean readers proved to be more receptive to the moralising aspects of Russian literature, rather than to its aesthetic or emotional aspects. For instance, Koreans remained largely indifferent to Tolstoy’s novels Anna Karenina, or War and Peace, which won world-wide acclaim, but were greatly impressed by Tolstoy’s religious and moralistic treatises which had very limited popularity among the Western readership. Korean intellectuals, influenced by the Confucian traditions, searched for useful social recipes in literature, and Russian fiction, according to its own long-standing tradition of preaching at, rather than entertaining the reader, usually satisfied their aspirations.

Soviet literature was also viewed largely through this prism. When the Korean reading public first became acquainted with the writings of Maxim Gorky, Korean leftist intellectuals perceived them primarily as persuasive didactic materials, and for that reason, the founding father of Soviet “socialist realism” gained extreme popularity among Korean intellectuals. Gorky, a life-long Communist sympathizer, not only contributed to the leftward drift of the Korean intellectual world, but also influenced the artistic methods and writing style of Korean literature. It is notable that in Gorky’s writing style the Korean intellectuals were impressed by the very traits which many contemporary Russian critics ridiculed, including an exuberance of sentimentality, over-romanticising, etc. Gorky’s exultant writing technique and his images of


104 See Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 16; V. I. Ivanova, Novaia proza Korei [The New Prose of Korea], Moscow: Nauka, 1987, 133-152; Mun Sŏk-u, “Rŏsia sasiljŭ munhak-ŭi suyong-kwa kŭ hakmunjŏk pyŏnyong, Tolŭsŭtoi chungsim-ŭro”, 214

105 V. I. Ivanova, Novaia proza Korei, 133-152.

extravagant paupers rebelling against authority and society particularly affected the "new tendency" literature and the KAPF in Korea. For example, the "new tendency" poet Yi Sang-hwa used the storm as a symbol of total rejuvenation in his "Yearning for Storm" ("P’okp’ung-úl kidarinnün maum"). A clear allusion to Gorky’s "Song of the Stormy Petrel"("Pesnia o burevestnikе"). The effect of Gorky was especially palpable in the works of the "pillar of Korean socialist realism" Yi Ki-yong which will be analysed in the third chapter of the present thesis. It is also worth noting that Gorky’s influence touched even those unsympathetic to Marxism. In a sense, the writer was transformed into an artistic icon and a kind of guru, or "life teacher" in the Korea of the 1920s and 1930s. His prestige also remained high in the following decades, despite all the changes in the political situation. Ch’oe Sŏ-hae, after the publication of his "Diary of Escape" ("T’alch’ulgi") which was written in 1925 and contained themes of spontaneous revolt and struggle which invoked clear associations with Gorky’s earlier works, received the allegedly flattering nickname of the "Korean Gorky". This fact was referred to in a completely positive sense in a South Korean book published in 1978, at the height of the anti-Communist hysteria in the ROK.

According to Chronology of the History of Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhaksan yŏndaep’yo), Gorky was the only Soviet writer whose two short stories had been translated into Korean before Liberation. However, Gorky was not the only Soviet author known to the intellectuals of pre-Liberation Korea; contemporary Soviet fiction was also available in Japanese translations (since by the 1930s virtually every educated Korean read Japanese fluently). V.I. Ivanova, citing a survey undertaken by "Munhak kősŏl" magazine in 1932, claims a number of Soviet writers were known and popular in Korea. These included Serafimovitch, Sholokhov, Fadeev, Gladkov, Esenin, Bednyi and Maiakovskii amongst others.

In the "Soviet era", i.e. in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the number of Soviet books disseminated in North Korea in Korean translation increased dramatically.

---

109 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 16.
112 Chosŏn munhaksan yŏndaep’yo [Chronology of the History of North Korean Literature], Pyongyang: Kyo’u’yuk tosŏ ch’ulp’ansa, 1957, 82, 84.
114 As the main channels for spreading Soviet cultural influence Charles Armstrong names the Soviet Information Bureau, the international book agency Mezdunarodnai kniga (which
The precise number remains unclear since the DPRK never published a complete national bibliography. However, Pak Chong-sik in 1955 declares that “hundreds of titles” of Soviet books had been published in North Korea.\textsuperscript{115} V.I. Ivanova mentioned that in 1945-1950 “overall seventy titles of Soviet and Russian writers have been translated in Korean and distributed in the DPRK”\textsuperscript{116} and that the Soviet translations “outnumbered the works created by Korean authors” during the same period.\textsuperscript{117} As for the total figure of all translated Soviet books which appeared in North Korea in 1945-1954, Ivanova quoted an official speech of Yi Ki-yŏng’s giving a figure of 8 million copies.

These Soviet texts naturally assumed the role of a guide for North Korean intellectuals in the confusing new world. However, as we have already mentioned, this role was sanctioned and reinforced by the political authorities. The leading North Korean writers fervently supported Kim Il Sung’s call for the “absorption of the progressive Soviet culture”. In the inaugural issue of the Munhwa chŏnsŏn (Literary Front – probably, a deliberate allusion to Kim Il Sung’s speech) magazine in July 1946, Han Sŏr-ya, the earliest eulogist of Kim Il Sung, published an article entitled “Kukche munhwa-ŭi kyoryu-e taehayŏ” (“On International Cultural Exchange”)\textsuperscript{118} where he stated that the Korean literature lagged behind that of the “great Soviet Union” and exhorted his colleagues to emulate the Soviet patterns by all means possible in order to produce a “Korean Gorky” some day.\textsuperscript{119} Literary magazines of the time strove to particularise the “absorption” trend through popularising Soviet models and patterns. If we look, for example, at the leading literary magazine Munhak yesul (Literature and Art) in 1949, we will notice that the lion’s share of the publication is devoted either to direct translations of Soviet literary pieces and Soviet literary critical materials or to articles on Soviet literature, art and drama, or to lectures on the Soviet way of life. The very titles of Korean critical articles of the time illustrate this tendency: Ko Il-hwan: “The Influence of Soviet Literature and the Successes of Our Own Literature”, Chu

distributed Soviet books and journals in Korean translation), the Soviet news agency TASS and Soverexportfilm, a branch of the Cinema Ministry (See Charles K. Armstrong, The North Korean Revolution 1945-1950, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003, 171). However, we have reason to believe that Mezhdunarodnaia kniga was not the only channel for the distribution of Soviet literature in Pyongyang. In all probability, the North Korean state had its own channels. If we look at the numerous Korean translations of Soviet texts which are now kept in the collection of the Russian State Library, it is easy to note that the lion’s share of these books were translated and published by Korean publishing houses such as Pyongyang kungnip ch’ulp’ansa, Kungnip tosŏ ch’ulp’ansa, Minju ch’ŏngnyŏnsa, Pyongyang Chosso ch’ulp’ansa, Kyoyuksŏng p’yŏnch’an kwanliguk, Minju ch’ŏngnyŏnsa, Nodongsinmunsa, Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, and others.

\textsuperscript{115} Pak Chong-sik, “Chosŏn munhak-e issōsŏ-ŭi ssobet’ŭ munhak-ŭi yŏnghyang”, 435.

\textsuperscript{116} V. I. Ivanova, “Sovetskaia literatura v Koree’ (1945-1955), 189.

\textsuperscript{117} V. I. Ivanova, “Sovetskaia voenno-patrioticheskaia literatura v Koree 40-50 godov”, 129.

\textsuperscript{118} The publication of this article was mentioned as a special event in Chronology of the History of North Korean literature (See: Chosŏn munhaksa nyŏndaep’yo, 105).

\textsuperscript{119} Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 45.
Yŏng-bo “Soviet Gilms Became the Living Textbooks for Our Film Production Industry”, Sin Ko-song “What Can We Learn From Soviet Drama?” etc. 120 The leading North Korean critic An Ham-gwang defined the situation in contemporary literature in the following manner, “The Liberation of Korea has at last freed up the path for our assimilation of Soviet literature”. 121

At the time North Korean critics and writers obviously saw nothing abnormal in treating Soviet writers as “teachers” and their novels as “textbooks”. 122 Indeed, Soviet literature with its artisitic authority and superior understanding of state socialism presented them with a conventional set of themes and images to emulate. With no embarrassment, the North Korean writer Yi Puk-myŏng in the article “Let’s Learn the Creative Methods of the Soviet Writers” (“Ssobet’ŭ chakkadŭl-ŭi ch’angjak pangbŏp-esŏ paeuja”) described in detail how he “learned” from a particular novel by the Soviet writer Chakovskii and called on his colleagues to do the same. 123 Analysing the North Korean literature in the period between 1945 and 1955, and, in the first instance, the works of the more established North Korean writers, such as Yi Ki-yŏng, Han Sŏr-ya, Hong Sun-ch’ŏl, Mun Pyŏng-gyun, Hwang Kŏn, Ch’ŏn Se-bong, Kim Cho-gyu, et al, the contemporary North Korean critic Pak Chong-sik admitted “…it is practically impossible to separate the achievements of these writers from the profound influence of Soviet literature”. 124 As an indication of the vast scale of the Soviet influence on North Korean literature, one need only mention the fact that this topic was a hot academic issue in contemporary North Korean and Soviet scholarship. Numerous academics such as An Ham-gwang, Pak Chong-sik, V. Ivanova, E.M. Zsoi, A.N. Taen and V.N. Lee 125 devoted articles and dissertations to monitoring the traces of the Soviet “patristic texts”


121 An Ham-gwang, Chosŏn munhaksa [Korean Literary History], Pyongyang: Kyoyuk tosŏ ch’ulp’ansa, 1956, 346.

122 Ibid., 346.


124 Ibid., 418.

(such as works by V. Maiakovskii, N. Ostrovsky, A. Fadeev and M. Sholokhov among others)\(^{126}\) in Korean writings before and after Liberation. Needless to say, these influences were referred to in extremely positive terms, and the very idea of plagiarism was never raised. Ivanova matter-of-factly remarked that the North Korean writers Ch’ on Se-p’ong and Yim Ch’ ong-suk, when writing their novels “chose the same story lines as in the novels of V. Vasilevskaya”, or that “in terms of artistic manner Hwang Kŏn’s novel “Haengpok” (“Happiness”) is strongly evocative of Fadeev’s Molodaia Gvardiiia (Young Guard)”\(^{127}\).

The Soviet observers, however, had their own reservations about North Korean literature. From the very beginning many of them did not fail to notice that the North Korean literature was confined within boundaries which were much stricter than the Soviet ones. The Soviets often tried to play down what they perceived as a misunderstanding of “socialist realism” or the excessive ideological zeal of their “younger brothers”. In the late 1940s, for instance, visiting Soviet writers and artists tried to persuade their North Korean colleagues not to write exclusively about the Party and Kim Il Sung, but to extol “eternal objects” such as love or flowers for a change. Both Chŏng Ryul and Pak Nam-su mentioned that the Soviet poet Gribachev, a top official in the Soviet Writers’ Union, who often visited Pyongyang in the late 1940s, lamented the absence of lyrical poetry in contemporary North Korean literature.\(^{128}\) These attempts became more frequent after the Second Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1954 which reproved the overt bureaucratisation of Soviet literature and called on the Soviet writers to express their feelings more freely. In light of the steadily increasing creative freedoms permitted to Soviet writers, the established Soviet writer and literary official Aleksei Surkov, on his arrival in Pyongyang in 1955, exhorted his North Korean colleagues to pay more attention to the problem of the individuality of the author.\(^{129}\)

Soviet scholars of North Korean literature also contributed to this mild criticism. Amidst the obligatory praises of the “new progressive literature of the liberated Korean people”, they could claim, for instance, that negative characters in the much-praised novel by Yi Ki-yŏng entitled Triang (Land) which, as the author himself admitted, was an emulation of Sholokhov’s Virgin Land Under the Plough, were too one-dimensional and plain to move the reader,\(^{130}\) that sometimes North Korean writers were prone to repeating the clichés of ideal heroes which were “too good to be true” or tedious, stereotypical artistic methods; or that some North Korean writers were too married to the theme of industrialisation and depictions of technological processes instead of

\(^{126}\) A long list of important “exemplary” Soviet works is given in the above-cited article of Pak Chong-sik, “Chosŏn munhak-e issŏsŏi ssobet’u munhak-ŭi yŏnghyang”, 437-438.

\(^{127}\) V. I. Ivanova, “Sovetskaia literatura v Koree”, 190.

\(^{128}\) Pak Nam-su, Chŏkch’i 6 nyŏn pukhan mundan, 126-136; interview with Chŏng Ryul.

\(^{129}\) Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 89.

\(^{130}\) V. I. Ivanova, “Li Gien i ego roman ‘Zemlia’” [Yi Ki-yŏng and His Novel Land], Kratkie soobscheniia institutu vostokovedeniia, 1955, #18, 38.
presenting “real people” of flesh and bone, etc. Given the fact that contemporary Soviet literature could hardly be described as a realm of creative liberty and imagination, these thinly veiled criticisms by the Soviet academics are significant. They meant that even by the suffocating Soviet standards, the degree of originality, individual touch and artistic freedom in contemporary North Korean writings was deemed to be lacking.

However, this careful reproach did not reach its intended goals. Pyongyang intellectuals did not succumb to the temptation of a Soviet-style “thaw”. Even if they had wished, their political supervisors had already made the decision to give the Soviet experiment of de-Stalinization a very wide berth.

Gradually, Soviet readers started to perceive North Korean literature as a laughing stock, as an unwitting parody on “normal” socialist realism. Still, one should not forget that it was Soviet culture which initially equipped the literature of the “fraternal Korean people” with the basic propagandistic images and patterns of political servility. As the contemporary North Korean scholar Pak Chong-sik remarked in the 1950s, “if it were not for Soviet literature with its classical exemplary works, our writers would have to travel a long, complicated and circuitous route”.

***

Given the realities of the “Soviet era” it was no surprise that the first “artistic task” which Kim II Sung personally gave to North Korean writers in 1946 was the production of accolades to Soviet-Korean friendship and eulogies to the Soviet “liberators” and the Soviet way of life. North Korean writers quickly responded to this demand by producing numerous pro-Soviet writings in different genres. Brian Myers has already made an original analysis of North Korean fiction on the theme of Soviet-Korean friendship. I shall consider another important genre in this regard: the travelogues of the orchestrated trips by North Korean writers to the Soviet Union in 1946-1955.

The organised pilgrimages of North Korean intellectuals to the USSR constituted an integral part of the Soviet-sponsored propaganda tours which included visits to exemplary factories and collective farms and arranged meetings with top officials as well as “incidental” encounters with supposedly “ordinary Soviet people”, etc. These staged trips became especially frequent in the final decade of Stalinism when the establishment of the “socialist camp” necessitated energetic efforts to promote the image of the USSR in the Soviet-dominated areas of Eastern Europe and East Asia. These lavishly sponsored journeys represented a significant burden on the straitened budget of the post-war Soviet Union and necessitated quite sophisticated and expensive

---

logistics. Yet Soviet policymakers rationalised these material expenditures as essential costs of opinion formation among the new allies, and, as time proved, they were correct in this assumption. Even foreign observers admitted that, “although the effort to manipulate foreign visitors may be costly in material terms, such costs have …been more than offset by [eventual] material and propaganda gains”.135

North Korean writers were also targeted by this scheme. The treatment they were subjected to in the USSR was, indeed, lavish and flattering, which proves that the Soviet policymakers did not perceive North Korean intellectuals as ready-made political servants of their occupying force but did their best to convert them to an admiration of the USSR. All the visiting North Korean writers commented on the “politeness and hospitality of the Soviet people” and the “perfectly organised service”.136 Yi T’ae-jun, who visited the USSR in 1946, a year of great food shortages in the post-war USSR, exclaimed: “Everything was free for us! For the last ten days we have forgotten how to use money!”137 Yi Puk-myông excitedly wrote about the luxury Hotel National in Moscow (where he resided, of course, for free).138 What made the Korean guests especially susceptible to this side of the Soviet visits was the miserable situation in their own country. Two of Yi Ki-yông’s long visits to the USSR were organised in 1952 and 1953, at the height of and closely following the devastating Korean War. Not surprisingly, the writer greatly appreciated all the luxuries he enjoyed in the USSR, including the entertainment in theatres and the careful choice of the best food, which the Soviet hosts endeavoured to make to suit Yi’s chronically sick stomach. When the writers’ health problems were exacerbated during the 1953 visit, the Soviet hosts surrounded him with particular care. For one month Yi Ki-yông stayed in a comfortable hotel room separate from the other members of the delegation, enjoyed the best quality medical service and a special diet. The Soviet hosts subsequently offered him several months of hospitality in the best Soviet sanatorium, an offer which Yi happily accepted. And again, all this was free of charge.139 The contrast with the life the writer had in Korea was just too strong to resist.

These pleasures made it easier for the Korean visitors to fulfil the demands of the Pyongyang authorities and to present the USSR as a “land of fulfilment” or “land of happiness”.140 Without a single exception, the North Korean visitors accepted the

134 For an insider’s account of the staged Soviet trips in the 1930s see the memoirs of the established Soviet interpreter V. Berekhov: Vainetin Berekhov, Kak ya stal perevodchikom Stalina [How I Became Stalin’s Interpreter], Moscow: Daem, 1993, 170-185, 235.
136 K’unak’ üni üi, 143-149.
137 Yi T’ae-jun, Ssoryón kihaeng, 67.
138 K’unak’ üni üi, 44-54.
139 Yi Ki-yông, Kongsanjuñi t’aeyang-ün pit ’nanda, 170-188.
140 Yi Ki-yông persistently stressed that “dear marshal Kim Il Sung” was the very first person who had inspired Koreans “to learn from the USSR”. See Yi Ki-yông, Kongsanjuñi t’aeyang-ün pit ’nanda, 88.
offered perspectives and myths and wrote what they were supposed to write about the “elder brother and teacher”.

The more important fact was that many of these myths and perspectives were soon integrated into North Korean discourse and became inseparable parts of the DPRK self-depiction in various forms of North Korean propaganda. Let us have a look at the major propagandistic messages which the Soviet travelogues of the 1940s-1950s delivered, and trace the connection of these messages with the political patterns in the North Korean literary writings and the literary world of the contemporary and subsequent epochs.

**Image of the “elder brother”**

The positive image of the Soviet Union was the primary intended message of the travelogues, and Korean visitors delivered this without exception. The overtly eulogistic images of Soviet life in North Korean travelogues exceeded the boldest expectations of their Soviet sponsors. Here are a few characteristic quotations:

“The sun of Communism is shining above humanity. Who hates the sun? Only hateful insects living in total darkness like mosquitoes, lice, or leeches. Capitalists hate Communism because they are in fact like these bad insects. They want to live in darkness and suck the blood of the working people... There are no peoples who hate Communism! Only capitalists and their acolytes can hate the sun of Communism!”\(^{141}\) (Yi Ki-yǒng, *Kongsanjuŭi t’aeyangŭn pit’nanda* (*The Sun of Communism is Shining*).)

“The USSR is a country of wisdom”; “All the old and ugly human things have disappeared here. It is a new world with new life, new habits and a new culture of a new people”; “The Soviet Union is a society with which Korea’s present and future are closely connected”.\(^{142}\) (Yi T’a’e-jun, *Ssoryŏn kihaeng* (*A Trip to the Soviet Union*).

---

\(^{141}\) Yi Ki-yǒng, *Kongsanjuŭi t’aeyangŭn pit’nanda*, 210-212. Being a chairman of the Soviet-Korean friendship society and having particularly good relations with his Soviet colleagues, Yi Ki-yǒng enjoyed Soviet hospitality more frequently than other DPRK writers. We cannot say for sure how often Yi Ki-yǒng visited the USSR during his lifetime, but his collection of Soviet travelogues published in 1960 in Pyongyang referred to four such trips. The first took place in 1946, when Yi headed a delegation of North Korean writers to the USSR. Yi T’a’e-jun was a member of this delegation. The second occurred in 1949, when Yi Ki-yǒng received a personal invitation to visit the USSR to take part in the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Pushkin. The third time was in 1952, when Yi Ki-yǒng visited the USSR as a representative of North Korean litterateurs to attend the celebration of the 100th anniversary of another Russian classic, Gogol. On the fourth occasion, Yi Ki-yǒng visited the USSR in 1953-1954 to participate in the celebration of the 36th anniversary of the October Revolution. This trip was the longest, since at this time Yi stayed in a Soviet sanatorium. (See Yi Ki-yǒng, *Kihaeng munjip* [Collection of Travelogues], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1960).

\(^{142}\) Yi T’a’e-jun, *Ssoryŏn kihaeng*, 5, 92-93, 122.
Though this positive attitude towards the Soviet Union was not rare among visiting foreign intellectuals, the Soviet eulogies of North Korean writers markedly surpassed Western accounts. In the North Korean case, the homage to all things Soviet was often augmented with characteristic self-humiliation. While extolling the strong and determined Soviets, the travelogues present Koreans, not as a people of independent spirit who consciously chose an alliance with Communism, but as timid and weak beings, ever grateful to their Soviet liberators. The examples of this tendency are numerous. In the travelogue poem of Min Pyŏng-gyun entitled “Yŏngye” (“Pride”), happy liberated Koreans “hid their faces in the wide chests of their Soviet liberators”. Hong Kŏn depicts a Korean student of Moscow State University who “was close to tears when he talked about the help which the Russian students gave to Koreans who were non-fluent in Russian”. During a meeting with Soviet children, Kang Hyo-sun told them about the Korean War which was being waged at the time, and he was surprised that Russian children felt compassion for the poor Koreans. The author drew the conclusion that “Soviet children are very kind – as are all Soviet people who are helping Korea”. The Korean writer certainly viewed the normal feeling of compassion as something extraordinary, as if he thought that Koreans did not deserve it, and ascribes it wholly to the exceptionally generous Soviet policy. Kang also relates his conversation with Samuel Marshak, a prominent Soviet children’s poet. Marshak again asked the Korean delegation about the fate of Korean children at this time of war and was told that despite many Korean children having lost their parents during the war, now they live happily under the loving care of the Party. At the same time, “South Korean children have a dreary and impoverished life under the pressure of American imperialism”. Kang Hyu-sun exclaimed humbly: “Listening to our story, Marshak lowered his head. We felt that he genuinely loved the Korean children. Why does he love them so much?” The Korean author failed to ask himself the obvious opposite question: why should not Marshak love them?

The poetry of late 1940s and early 1950s, devoted to Soviet-Korean relations, also takes the perspective of a powerful and wise Russian versus the weak and helpless Korean. For instance, the protagonist of Pak Sŏng-gŏl’s poem from the anthology *Glory to Stalin* (1949) claims that the Soviet liberators “raised the flame of life” in the soul of a Korean who had previously lived “as a submissive animal”. Brian Myers attests to this same intonation in the contemporary North Korean fiction and mentions

---


144 *K’ŭnak’ īn uŭi*, 6-8.

145 Ibid., 136-137.

146 Ibid., 170-173.

147 Ibid., 198.

that the Soviet side was often “embarrassed by these tributes which far exceeded even the Eastern Block standards of obsequiousness”.149

However, this self-humiliating tendency proved to be short-lived. In the mid-1950s, when the DPRK was moving beyond Soviet control in order to construct its own model of national Stalinism, the teacher/apprentice pattern in the relations of both countries began to deteriorate. Moreover, very often it was substituted for the opposite model. As a characteristic example we might cite a commemoration essay of Han Sŏr-ya, “P’ajeyebû-wa na (Fadeev and I)” which was published in the August (No. 8) 1956 issue of the literary magazine Chosŏn munhak150 and was devoted to a memoir of the recently deceased Alexander Fadeev, the Chairman of the Soviet Writers’ Union.

According to Han Sŏr-ya, Fadeev, the mighty top-ranked Soviet official, appears as a timid, naive and ordinary creature who readily blushed before his Korean colleague. Fadeev allegedly used to seek Han’s company, asked for Han’s advice and opinion about his new writings and was as happy as a lark when he finally received the long-awaited encouragement from Han. Fadeev was allegedly impatient when waiting for the translation of Han’s works into Russian and especially for his works “of the anti-Japanese fighting period,” because these novels, he hoped, would give the ignorant Fadeev a clear perspective on Korea’s history and mentality. Han Sŏr-ya, on the contrary, emerged as self-sufficient, confident and slightly condescending to his eager Russian friend. Han mercifully granted his company to the timid Russian but would also skip a meeting if he felt too busy.

Certainly the portrait of Fadeev which Han presented to the Korean readers in 1956 is not a plausible description of a high-ranking Soviet administrator. These fantasies revealed more about Han himself, with all his wishful thinking and hidden inferiority complexes. But more important, this picture indicated that the earlier pattern of “a Korean crying on the broad chest of a Soviet liberator” was to be reversed with the growth of Korean national Stalinism.

The proper place of a Communist intellectual

Another important message of the travelogues was the endorsement of the Soviet pattern of the proper social place of a Communist writer and the application of this pattern to the cultural environment of the DPRK.

The frequent meetings with the Soviet writers, which took place during these staged trips, provided North Korean intellectuals with a living model of the interactions between an intellectual and the power-holders in a socialist country. Soviet intellectuals eagerly offered spiritual leadership to their Korean colleagues on the questions of how a “progressive writer” was supposed to behave and what he or she should produce in order to serve the Party. These ideas had been conveyed by the translated literary texts,

149 Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature, 70.
150 Han Sŏr-ya, “P’ajeyebû-wa na” [Fadeev and I], Chosŏn munhak, 1956, #8, 97-106.
but the first-hand experience, be it staged, real or invented, confirmed and reinforced these messages.

With the help of the Soviet hosts, Pyongyang intellectuals established personal contacts with distinguished Soviet writers, most of whom doubled as high-level literary officials, including Surkov, Simonov, Leonov, Polevoi, Gribachev and Mikhalkov. North Korean writers visited Soviet literary dignitaries in their offices as well as in their private homes; they attended official ceremonies and were entertained together at parties. The atmosphere of these meetings was warm and friendly, and the guests, being accustomed to the traditionally more hierarchical and reserved style of relations common to the Korean bureaucracy, admired the easy-going approach of the Soviet “literary dignitaries”.  

However, the Soviet colleagues never ceased to preach to their Korean “younger brothers”, instilling in them the rigid formulae and hackneyed phrases of the Soviet ideological and political discourse. Yi Puk-muŏng recollected that while meeting with the North Korean delegation, A. Surkov stressed that in the first instance: “We have to show you a lot of things here... North Korean writers must learn a lot from the USSR”. Yi T’aē-jun recalled that the Soviet writers instructed them in the importance of “leaning from real life”, “working in the thick of things” and noted that all the Soviet writers themselves are either “of common origin” or had “lived for a long time immersed in the people”. Even the children’s writer S. Marshak failed to miss the opportunity to urge the visiting writer Kang Hyo-sun that “our literature is a Party literature and this principle must be reflected in children’s literature as well.”

Apart from this general guidance, Soviet writers would also give their Korean colleagues more concrete instructions. Hong Kŏn recollects a meeting with A. Shtein, a director of the drama department in the Soviet Writers’ Union. Shtein indignantly told the Korean guests about some visiting West European writer who had published his Moscow diary in a foreign newspaper and claimed that there was no toilet paper in a Moscow hotel. Shtein called this article very “narrow-minded” and stressed that Koreans should write “deeper memoirs” about the Soviet Union. It is noteworthy that Shtein did not accuse the Western writer of lying and that toilet paper was in fact available in the hotel. He made it quite obvious that his major concern—even demand—of his Korean guests was not truth itself but the “correct” image of the USSR.

It is curious how masterfully the Soviet officials managed to present the activity of the Soviet Writers’ Union “in a proper light” to their Korean guests. Yi Puk-myŏng relates an interesting episode. When the delegation of North Korean writers visited the Moscow office of the Soviet Writers’ Union in early May, they could find no writers there. The Korean quests were told that the majority of Soviet writers had willingly left

---

152 Ibid., 55-59.
153 Yi T’aē-jun, Ssoryŏn kihaeng, 195-198.
154 K’ŭnak’in uái, 200.
155 Ibid., 161-162.
their comfortable Moscow offices and gone to the factories and industrial sites in order to “study real life”. It took some time before several “important” Soviet writers (including Surkov, Simonov, Leonov and Polevoi), managed to take a break from their busy schedules to meet the Korean delegation and lecture the visitors on what and how the writers of a “progressive country” were supposed to write.\footnote{Ibid., 55-59.}

Yi Puk-myŏng seemed to be deeply impressed by the meeting with these Soviet “teachers” and skilled “engineers of the human soul”, as well as by the enthusiasm of the Soviet writers. As a foreigner he naturally did not suspect that the absence of the Soviet writers at their workplaces could be explained by the chain of national holidays which still empties Moscow’s offices in early May, rather than their alleged presence at factories and plants. As we can see, the Soviet guides skilfully turned the potentially embarrassing situation into a lesson, demonstrating the exemplary behaviour of the Soviet writers who were allegedly completely devoted to Party tasks.

With similar dexterity, the Soviet officials managed to reinterpret politically slippery incidents inside the Soviet Writers’ Union to their Korean “apprentices”. Such incidents were, indeed, not rare in the final decade of Stalinism. Suffice it to mention the campaigns over the literary magazines Zvezda and Leningrad (1946), Party criticism over Fadeev’s novel Molotova Gvardiia (Young Guard) (1947), or the persecution of Jewish writers (1950-1952).\footnote{E. Gromov, Stalin: vlast’ i iskusstvo, 452.} Since the victims of these incidents were often well-known in Korea, the Soviet writers felt the urge to “explain” the situations to their North Korean colleagues. For instance, Yi T’ae-jun was openly frustrated by the 1946 political campaign over the Soviet poet Akhmatova whom he deeply admired.\footnote{Interview with Chŏng Ryul.} Soviet officials during Yi’s visit to the USSR in 1947 took pains to explain to him all the “wrong doings” of his favourite poet.\footnote{Yi T’ae-jun, Ŝoryŏn kihaeng, 123-125.} Often Soviet officials presented “adapted versions” of the events. For instance Yi Puk-myŏng, during a conversation with the Soviet writers, broached the topic of the rewriting of Fadeev’s Molotova Gvardiia (Young Guard). This novel about young resistance fighters who operated in the occupied territory during the Second World War and died at the hands of the Gestapo, was deemed exemplary in North Korea and enjoyed a great popularity among North Korean readers. Yet on the 3\textsuperscript{rd} of December, 1947 the editorial of Pravda, an official organ of the Soviet Communist Party, criticised Fadeev’s best-seller for its “overtly independent” young heroes and its alleged “underestimation of the Party’s leading role”. As a result, in 1951 the writer was forced to rewrite the entire novel.\footnote{Aleksandner Nemzer, Razgromlennyi generalnyi [Demolished General Secretary]. Retrieved from at http://www.ruthenia.ru/nemzer/FAD.html (24.12.01)} Polevoi explained to Yi Puk-myŏng that the novel was “correct” until the moment that the new historical facts about the Party’s actual supervision of the partisans became known from declassified documents. Following a personal visit to the city of Krasnodon, the site of the resistance group’s activity, Fadeev allegedly came to an
independent decision to rewrite the novel in order to make it fit the real situation.\textsuperscript{161} As we can see, the Soviet literary officials turned an uneasy episode into yet another lesson for their Korean apprentices. In this version, the exemplary writer Fadeev demonstrated commendable self-criticism and political consciousness, attributes which all devoted Communist writers should demonstrate.

Through all this ideological drilling and preaching to their Korean colleagues, the Soviet writers instilled a general pattern of social attitudes which an intellectual must demonstrate under the new conditions. In the Soviet official parlance it was referred to as the “active social position of a progressive writer”. On the surface it was the idea that “progressive literature” and “progressive” Communist politics were inseparable, but in reality it meant that North Korean writers were to turn into Party propagandists.

These educational efforts of the Soviet writers were not in vain. As the subsequent history of North Korean literature proved, North Korean policymakers not only incorporated the Soviet stereotypes of the obligatory “active social position” of an intellectual, but they also soon created their own much more regularised and constrained system of political involvement of writers.

Indeed in North Korea, this system emerged in patterns which were unthinkable even in the Stalinist Soviet Union with its frequent use of militarist and mechanical rhetoric in relation to cultural affairs such as, “cultural fronts”, “engineers of the human soul”, “building poetry”, etc. One such specific form was the distribution of obligatory topics to North Korean writers. Pak Nam-su mentioned the frustration which Pyongyang intellectuals felt when the Party began this practice in the late 1940s, since many of these mandated topics (such as land reform or industrialisation) did not lend themselves easily to poetic.\textsuperscript{162} Chŏng Ryul recollects that Soviet Koreans treated this system with light irony.\textsuperscript{163} Indeed, in the Soviet Writers’ Union the similar system of “obligatory themes”, though at first actively promoted by some overzealous members, was soon discarded as absurd, and one of the most fervent critics of the “obligatory themes” was the prominent Soviet writer Yuri Olesha.\textsuperscript{164} The absence of mandatory topics did not leave Soviet literature free from political commitments, but it did give Soviet writers some space to manoeuvre.\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{161} K’ŏnok’ŭn u-ui, 80-86.
\textsuperscript{162} Pak Nam-su, Chŏk-ch’i 6 nyŏn-ui pukhan mundan, 59.
\textsuperscript{163} Interview with Chŏng Ryul. I would like to add, however, that Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, being a Soviet Korean poet, tolerated this system. For more information concerning Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, read the next chapter.
\textsuperscript{164} George Bisztray, Marxist Models of Literary Realism, 42-43.
\textsuperscript{165} Though Stalin often expressed his disappointment over the lack of novels on contemporary themes in Soviet literature, even he hesitated to mandate that the Soviet writers write on specific topics. (See K. Simonov, Glazami cheloveka moego pokoleniia, Razmysleniia o I. V. Staline [Through the Eyes of a Person of My Generation. Contemplations on Stalin], Moscow: Republika, 1989, 183.
In North Korea there was no intellectual who was willing to raise a voice against the distribution of literary topics, and this system soon became deeply rooted in the North Korean literary tradition.

Pak Nam-su reports another specific form of political control over intellectuals in the DPRK: the so-called “production plans”, which were modelled after those in industry. According to these plans, a writer was required to “produce” a particular number of novels or poems in a given period of time. Those who for some reason failed to fulfil the “production plan” were to be criticised and punished. Chŏng Ryul recalls that the entire “production plan” system was initiated by Kim Ch’ang-man, the then head of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda (munhwain pujang) in the KWP Central Committee.

Chŏng also claims that Kim Ch’ang-man authorised the system of the obligatory dispatch of North Korean writers to exemplary plants, factories and farms in order to extol these “real life” experiences in their works (a task which in its turn was also compulsory).\textsuperscript{166} The roots of this system can be traced to the rhetoric of the Soviet Writers’ Union which, as we have just seen, promoted it to their North Korean guests. In practice, however, the visits of the Soviet writers to plants and factories were encouraged but never deemed obligatory.

The wide promotion of obligatory “educational tours” to industrial sites had far-reaching consequences for North Korean literature. By placing more emphasis on factual rather than on the artistic aspects of literature, the Pyongyang literary officials stimulated the growth of so-called “silhwang munhak”, or “documentary literature” in the DPRK which presented depictions of technological processes or offered biographies of “people’s heroes” and, in fact, differed very little from journalistic reports. The writers were forced to adjust to the new demands and this could not but influence the artistic quality of their creative writings. A typical example of this tendency is Yi Ki-yŏng’s novel \textit{Han yŏsŏng-ŭi umnyŏng (The Fate of A Woman)} written in the early 1960s and, as the author claims, based on real events. Yi Ki-yŏng readily acknowledged the low artistic quality of his work and its overburdening with factual data, but justified these deficiencies by its political “usefulness” and the alleged truthfulness of his book, as well as the “urgent necessity of class education for young people”.\textsuperscript{167} It is noteworthy that “documentary prose” still occupies an important place in North Korean literature to this day.\textsuperscript{168}

North Korean intellectuals not only unquestionably subordinated themselves to the demands which the Party imposed on them, but often initiated their own forms of control and restrictions. The poet Paek In-chun, for instance, advocated the so-called

\textsuperscript{166} Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

\textsuperscript{167} Yi Ki-yŏng, \textit{Sud’ba odnoi zhenshchiny [The Fate of a Woman]}, Pyongyang: Izdatel’stvo literatury na inostran’nykh izykakh, 1964, 8.

“brigade method” according to which poetry and prose were supposed to be created by collectives (“brigades”) of authors in order to avoid individual political mistakes. Though this system was not fully established in the 1940s, it flourished later in the 1960s when the individual authorship of literary works was practically abolished for a decade and Korean prose came to be written by anonymous “creative groups”.

Thus, in respect to the political control over literature and men of the pen, the North Korean policymakers soon left their Soviet teachers far behind.

**Acquisition of Soviet cultural images and clichés**

The acquisition of officially endorsed Soviet images and clichés and the absorption of these foreign stereotypes into the North Korean discourse, became an inseparable part of the policy of “learning from the Soviets”. As we have mentioned already, the Soviet literary dignitaries strongly encouraged their North Korean “younger brothers” to assimilate the vital traits of “the most progressive world culture”. The process of adaptation of the Soviet culture and mythology and their amalgamation with the Korean heritage was actively proceeding at the time, and the literary writings present numerous examples of this.

The visiting North Korean writers strove to keep abreast of this political line. While presenting an embellished image of Soviet reality, they constantly resort to Soviet-made images, trying to intertwine them with the Korean discourse and include significant Soviet political and cultural figures and events into the DPRK heroic pantheon. In the poem “Two Leaders” Min Pyŏng-gyun has the Korean narrator cry at the sight of the two deceased Soviet leaders Lenin and Stalin in the Moscow Mausoleum, completely overlooking the fact that both were the leaders of a distant foreign country. In another poem Min depicts the mother of two Soviet Communist martyrs Zoya and Shura Kosmodemyansky (“Ŏmŏni” (“Mother”)) as an image which was supposed to touch the hearts of the Korean audience.

Not only contemporary Soviet figures, but also events and personalities of traditional Russian culture were expected to be inserted into the Korean discourse. Yi Ki-yŏng reported on the speech which he delivered in Moscow at a ceremony commemorating the opening of a monument to Gogol. Yi declared that: “Gogol loved the people of his country and hated its enemies. So, too, must the Korean people, now fighting for their independence against the American invaders, learn from Gogol.”

---

169 Interview with Chŏng Ryul.

170 One of the earliest examples of this tendency was the above-cited anthology, Han Sŏr-ya (ed.), Yonggwang-ŭi Ssŭtal-in-ge: Ssŭtal-in t’ansaeng 70-chunyŏn kinyŏm ch’ulp’ansa [Glory to Stalin: an Anthology of Works Dedicated to the 70th birthday of Stalin], published in 1949. It contained North Korean poems devoted to Stalin, which, in fact, presented this foreign leader as a pure Korean hero.

171 K’unak’ŭn uŭi, 12-14.

172 Ibid., 15-18.

was as if the Korean people had no appropriate national figure from whom to draw inspiration.

Soviet political symbols were supposed to inspire Koreans as well. Many visiting writers eagerly presented “the hero city of Stalingrad” as a part of their own culture. Yi Puk-myong, for instance, claimed that Stalingrad was “a hero city, close to the hearts of all Koreans, who, just like the Soviets before them, are fighting now with the foreign (i.e. American-TG) invasion”. Moscow, being a Soviet capital, was presumed to occupy a special place in the Korean heroic pantheon. Yi Ki-yong wrote: “Everybody in Korea has a great desire to visit Moscow at least once. And the reason is not just a simple gratitude for the liberation of our country from Japanese colonisation. Nor is it simply because of the heartfelt brotherly assistance which the Soviets are providing to Korea nowadays. It is because the Soviet people are in the first ranks of those who are struggling for peace and democratic progress all over the world and they lead mankind on the road to freedom and happiness”. “Moscow is the heart of the whole world nowadays,” continued Yi Ki-yong, repeating a cliché which was at the time oft-repeated in Soviet verse and song.

Soviet images were often used to justify or reinforce current domestic political trends in Pyongyang. The chapter entitled “A brilliant flourishing of socialist culture and art” in Yi Ki-yong’s travelogue of 1954, is characteristic in this regard. While depicting the splendid Soviet theatres, museums, music halls and opera houses which represented “the wealth of the great socialist art and the wonderful achievements of the Soviet Union”, Yi stressed that Soviet art presents no examples of so-called “pure art” – an “anti-people art” which supposedly “symbolises bourgeois interests” and flourishes in contemporary South Korea where the enslaved artists must serve the interests of the American imperialists. The author extols the “progressive socialist Soviet literature which was born in the struggle with reactionary tendencies”. The implications of these statements were all too clear – Yi Ki-yong (or his editors) resorted to Soviet authority to rationalise the incipient purges against the “reactionary pure artists” in the DPRK.

The process of Sovietisation/Russification of the North Korean discourse naturally led to the absorption of Soviet political catchphrases and formal clichés. The Korean visitors endlessly repeated stale Soviet propagandistic dictums and slogans, such as

175 Yi Ki-yong, Kongsanjuui t’aeyang-uin pit’nanda, 13.
176 Ibid., 14.
177 The description of Moscow as “the heart of the world” was a very common cliché in the Soviet propaganda of the late 1940s. For example, Alexei Surkov, a prominent Soviet poet and literary functionary who was sometimes involved in North Korean literary politics as well, published in 1946 a collection of poems under the telling title The Heart of The World. Poetical Tributes to Moscow (See: Aleksei Surkov, Sertise mira. Sthi o Moske [The Heart of the World. Poetical Tributes to Moscow], Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1946).
178 Yi Ki-yong, Kongsanjuui t’aeyang-uin pit’nanda, 158-163.
179 Ibid., 160.
“Moscow is a harbour of the five seas”, “Moscow is the heart of the whole world” (Yi Ki-yŏng), “the First of May is a festival of hope and peace”, or “Soviet people make a garden out of their land” (Hong Kŏn), “those foreign idiots who trumpet the slogan of Communist danger in fact hate the common workers and peasants who refuse to bow to them” (Hong Kŏn), “The Volga river is the mother of Russia” (Kang Hyo-sun), or “people are the main values in the Soviet Union” (Yi Ki-yŏng). During his fourth visit to Moscow soon after Stalin’s death, Yi Ki-yŏng attended the Mausoleum where he saw Stalin lying in state near Lenin. The writer, like the above-cited Min Pyŏng-gyun in his poem, passionately described the grief and sadness which allegedly overcame him when he saw the “two great leaders who devoted their lives to giving happiness to all humanity”. Yi concluded this passage with the following statement: “And I deeply empathised with the emotions of the people who gathered before the Mausoleum on this chilly, winter’s day”.\(^{180}\) In fact, the image of “chilly and snowy weather” and the crowd of people gathered before the Mausoleum “despite the weather” was one of the stalest images of official Soviet journalism. This image of a phenomenon which was very common in Russia anyway, was supposed to stress the devotion of ordinary people who could not be stopped by external obstacles in their eagerness to honour their leaders.

All these clichés and catchphrases, which first appeared in the North Korean depiction of the Soviet reality, quickly moved to the political lexicon of the DPRK, filling the pages of North Korean newspapers and works of fiction. It is worth noting, however, that the wholesale acquisition of Soviet political clichés by North Korean intellectuals was also accompanied by the creation of parallel stereotypes of their own which better correlated with the Korean traditional heritage. Though stemming from the same political perspective, these newly forged Korean “socialist realism” stereotypes appeared to be more sentimental, calling to mind the traditions of the Korean “new novels” of the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century.\(^{181}\)

Take, for example, the Korean descriptions of Leningrad which had survived 900 days of siege by the Nazi army. In the contemporary Soviet discourse, Leningrad was usually referred to as “a hero city”, “a staunch city”, “a city of indomitable citizens”, with endless allusions to the stoic endurance and unbending will of its citizens. In North Korea accounts it, however, was turned into “a city of suffering and tears” (Min Pyŏng-gyun, “Leningradesŏ” (“In Leningrad”).\(^{182}\)

The topic of international friendship was also delivered in images which Soviet readers would probably find too sentimental. Yun Tu-hŏn devoted a whole chapter of his travelogue to a lengthy and sugary story about his friendship with a little Russian girl called Nellie, with whom he used to speak “through feelings”. Nellie asked the author about Korean children; the author told her that Korean children were bravely

---

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 8-9.

\(^{181}\) For a discussion of these “new novels” see: V. I. Ivanova, Novaja Proza Korei; Yun Pyŏng-no, Hanguk-ŭn hyŏndaehae chakka chapk’umron [Study of the Works of Modern Korean Writers], Seoul: Sŏnggyunkwan taehakkyo ch’ulp’anbu. 1993, 10-13.

\(^{182}\) K’ŏnak ŭn uŭi, 19-22.
fighting with the enemy and persistently studying at school; the author told the little
girl that Koreans were very thankful to Soviet people; the girl seemed to be very
impressed and determined to visit Korea in the future. The girl played with an unusual
toy, a rubber frog, but decided to present it to the author, in order he might give it to
some Korean child. When the author tried to refuse this precious gift, the girl started to
cry bitterly. Thus, Yun was forced to accept the gift. And now every time he looked at
the rubber frog he "thought about the little Russian girl with her big, kind heart". This
narration is inappropriately sweet for the contemporary Soviet discourse.

Characteristic in this regard is Yi Ki-yông's account of his visit to the museum of
Gorky in Gorky City. Speaking about the writer who, in Soviet discourse, was often
referred to as the "Stormy Petrel", Yi chose to concentrate not on the struggle and
resistance in Gorky's life story (which any Soviet author would), but, primarily, on the
writer's bitter family background and his childhood sufferings. Yi Ki-yông eloquently
narrates the story of a poor talented boy who could not study since his vicious
grandfather refused to support him and tearfully contrasts the grandfather as "the
embodiment of evil" with his angelic grandmother.

Thus, with a stroke of Yi Ki-yông's pen, the indomitable "Stormy Petrel" has
turned into a pitiful personage, somewhat reminiscent of the characters of Yi's own
pre-Liberation novels. Yi Ki-yông's perception of Gorky strongly reflected Korean
cultural predispositions: the author primarily focused on family and educational issues;
he was more inclined to lament obstacles than to exalt the fortitude in required
overcoming them.

Quite predictably, under the increasing influence of the nationalist rhetoric in the
DPRK in the late 1950s, the images of ever-grateful Koreans crying at the Mausoleum
over the departed Lenin or Stalin evaporated from the pages of North Korean writings.
However one cannot say that the propagandistic clichés which entered the North
Korean discourse at the time completely disappeared from later publications: one need
only to look through the pages of Nodong Sinmun where one will encounter huge
amounts of Soviet-originated idioms. And the old Soviet political clichés are noticeable
even in today's North Korean literature and press.

Indeed, to some extent these stereotypes were Koreanized: the characteristic
touch of sentimentalism, which emerged in the stories about the rubber frog or the
pitiful childhood of the "Stormy Petrel" in the initial period of North Korean
propaganda, was preserved. It is especially traceable in the North Korean works about
the historical past (look, for instance, at Yi Ki-yông's above-mentioned novel The Fate
of a Woman which was written in the early 1960s). However, these occasional streaks
of sentimentalism failed to outshine the general militant (and, for that reason, quite
Soviet-like) aspect of North Korean propaganda.

---

183 Ibid., 97-106.

184 Yi Ki-yông, Kongsanjuüi t'aeyang-un pit'nanda, 55-60.
Social Idylls

The travelogues made a great contribution towards the crystallisation of the general propagandistic image of the DPRK as another heavenly “socialist Eden”. In many regards, the picture of the DPRK which emerged in North Korean fiction mirrored the embellished image of the USSR which appeared in the travelogues. Although Soviet literature also promoted the idea of the USSR as a “socialist paradise”, this literary portrait was not particularly clear-cut or unequivocal: even in the most orthodox Soviet novels sub-plots often diluted the intended propagandistic message of a writer, or even supplanted it. Staged trips represented a much more refined and strict kind of propaganda: the pictures of the “socialist paradise” which were presented to the foreign tourists surpassed the literary “socialist realist” depictions in terms of exaltation and gross overstatement. North Korean writers digested these patterns, not only applying them to their depiction of the Soviet Union, but also projecting their basic traits onto the propagandistic self-image of the DPRK. Let us consider these major sets of Soviet self-presentation myths and their parallels with the self-image of the DPRK as they appeared in North Korean literature.

The USSR is a rich, developed, industrialized society.

The presentation of the USSR as a developed industrialised country constituted the major postulate of Soviet domestic and international propaganda. It would be wrong to reject this assumption as patently false since up to 1945-1955 the Soviet Union was, indeed, a relatively developed industrial country which could boast real achievements such as rapid industrialisation and post-war reconstruction, long holidays, relatively short working hours, free education and medical services, some legal and social rights for women, etc. However the promoters of the essentially propagandistic image of a successfully industrialized USSR deliberately misrepresented three important constituents of the picture:

a) The relative technical sophistication of the Soviet industries when compared to industries of the world’s leading countries (propaganda insisted that the Soviet technology was superior which was not the case in most areas);

b) The labour conditions and living standards of the majority of the population (the hardships were ignored, and living standards grossly embellished);

c) The human costs which had been paid for the “Communist wonder” (the costs were recognized, but presented as voluntary sacrifice).

For instance, Yi Ki-yŏng described a Soviet automated brick factory which he visited during one staged trip as “the most progressive factory in the world” on the grounds that there was “no use of manual labour needed whatsoever”. As an entirely unique “miracle machine” in this factory Yi mentions a weight-lifting crane (kijunggi) which was allegedly invented in the Soviet Union and existed “nowhere else” in the
world. Needless to say this was not true. The propagandists certainly assumed their audience was ignorant about the real situation in the world of construction technology.

Or take the characteristic notion which Yi Puk-myông presents in 1954: “The USSR is a country of aircraft. And I do not mean military but civil air-planes, which are used for pleasure by everybody. One of my colleagues joked that there are more air-planes in the Soviet Union than chickens in North Korea”. The writer certainly exaggerated the role of aviation in the USSR of 1954 where civil aircraft were by no means a common form of travel for ordinary Soviet citizens. Yet, given the closed character of Soviet society, his Korean readers had no way of verifying this statement (and note again the self-effacing intonation of the joke).

A similar gross exaggeration of Korea’s own achievements and material progress soon became a typical hallmark of Pyongyang’s official propaganda. One of the authors who laid the foundation for the image of a heavily industrializing “new Korea” was the Soviet Korean poet Cho Ki-ch’ôn, whose activity will be discussed in the next chapter. As a typical example of this tendency one might usefully look at this poet’s long epic “Saengae-ôi Norae” (“The Song of Life”) (June, 1950) in which Cho extolled North Korean tractors, airplanes and the “proud smoke of success” of Korean factories as progressive signs of the new socialist Korea. Naturally Cho omitted to mention that North Korea had already been quite heavily industrialized by the Japanese colonial rulers, so these miracles had little to do with the socialist system. Other contemporary North Korean stories devoted to the topic, whilst admitting the existence of factories and enterprises in pre-liberated Korea, stressed that only after Liberation could Koreans work at these factories happily and effectively, while in earlier times they had just suffered as slaves.

The image of industrialization allegedly first brought to North Korea by the socialist system is still popular in Pyongyang’s domestic propaganda. Of course no references to the Japanese role in the creation of a modern infrastructure can be tolerated. Today, again, Pyongyang’s propagandists can count upon the virtual complete isolation of their audience from the world and their lack of historical knowledge. Take, for instance, the recent poem “Hago tto hago sip’ûn mal” (“Words Which I Would Like to Say More and More”) where the author Chôn Kûm-ok, while referring to the achievements of socialist Korea, resorts to the stale truism of a country boy who before Liberation “had never heard the sound of a train” but now enjoyed the

---

185 Ibid., 25.
186 K ônâe’ûn uîi, 69.
188 See, on this matter, the novel by Yi Sang-hyôn, Namyônbaek-esô on p’yônji [The Letter Which Came From Namyonbaek], Chosôn munhak, 1956 #4, 22-35, or the poem by Han Myông-ch’ôn, “Pot’ong Nodongil” [The Ordinary Day of Labor], Chosôn munhak, 1956, #2, 76-79.
opportunity to taste the fruits of civilization and study at university. It is interesting that today’s Pyongyang propaganda writers, while facing unpleasant questions and difficult choices, defensively turn to the old propagandistic clichés of an allegedly high-tech North Korean society. The symbols of this “high technology”, however, have remained largely unchanged from the 1950s. Take the characteristic poem “Hyŏnsil-ŭl Pora!” (“Look at the Reality!”), written by Sŏ Chŏng-in, a member of Ch’ŏngryŏn. Protecting the reputation of the DPRK from the attacks of unspecified “reactionaries” (obviously fellow Ch’ŏngryŏn Koreans who had lost their faith in the paradise-like qualities of the DPRK), Sŏ points to what he considers to be the signs of a happy North Korean society: girls working on tractors whilst singing merry songs, children sitting on buses and smiling, etc. The very imagery used to demonstrate the alleged “development” of Korea has remained unchanged over the decades. In the 1990s, Sŏ Chŏng-in refers to the same “new tractors” and “merrily laboring factory workers”, etc as were used, for example, in the poem of Chŏng Mun-hyang “Chogukiyŏ kkŭt’ŏmnŭn na-ŭi kippûmiyŏ” (“O, My Country, My Endless Joy!”) which was written in 1956.

The problem of the real life conditions of the Soviet workers constituted the most inglorious aspect of the Soviet “industrialisation miracle”, and for that reason became the object of particularly intense false advertising. Yi Puk-myŏng depicted a “typical” large apartment house where ordinary Soviet workers allegedly lived. He noted a few supposedly private cars near the entrance and overheard the sounds of a piano through the window. The author “felt attracted to the life of the Soviet workers”.

Of course this picture by no means reflected the “typical” conditions of the workers’ lives in the post-war Soviet Union. It is interesting that Soviet literature

---

189 Chŏn Kŭm-ok, “Hago ttohago sip’ŭn mal” [The Words Which I Would Like to Say More and More], in P’it’nanŭn Rojŏng, 169-172. The remark about the “sound of a train” is especially curious since for all practical purposes the North Korean railway network has remained unchanged since the colonial era. Most of the existing lines were built by the Japanese. The railway technology has also not changed much. (See Ch’oe Hyŏn-su, “Pukhan-ŭi ch’oldo hyŏnhwang” [The Contemporary State of Railways in North Korea], Kukmin ilbo, 2000.09.19, 5)


193 K’unak’an uŭi, 66.

In reality, most of the Soviet workers at the time lived in dugouts, decaying barracks or in so-called “communal flats” with kitchens and toilets shared by a dozen or so families. A separate apartment was a luxury which only the chosen few could enjoy – not to mention private cars which remain relatively rare even in present-day Russia. See: Elena Zubkova, Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obschestvo: politika i povsednevnost’ 1945-1953 [Postwar Soviet society: politics and everyday life in 1945-1953], Moscow: Rosspen, 2000, 55-56; Bryon
was demonstrably less involved in this kind of falsification: in a Soviet novel or poem of the 1940s-1950s it is difficult to find a protagonist who is described as living in a separate apartment, let alone owning a car. However, the North Korean “socialist realism” widely promoted myths about the luxurious living conditions of Korean workers or farmers. Yi Ki-yŏng in his novel Ttang (Land) (1949) constantly used the image of a new house as a symbol of the new and progressive lives of his heroes. When the female protagonist Sun-Ok expresses her doubts about the possibility of constructing a new house, her husband quickly reproaches her: “I am a son of North Korea. Has there ever been anything in North Korea which has been planned but not fulfilled?!”. The images of workers’ families moving into spacious new houses, a child taking a bath in a big bathtub, or a pretty worker’s wife dressed in new expensive clothes became extremely popular in North Korean literature, especially after the Korean War. While eulogising these life’s essentials as expressions of the benevolence of the Party and the socialist state, the authors failed to explain, of course, that in reality “new houses” known as “munhwa chut’aek” or “cultural accommodation” meant very uncomfortable apartments which Korean families were forced to share with others, and that the new clothes of a Korean wife would probably be the only clothes she would have to wear for at least half a year. Recent Korean writings still widely resort to images of a “munhwa chut’aek” as the symbol of a happily developed North Korean society. The poet Ch’oe Ch’ang-man, depicting the happy life of North Koreans in 1998, uses the same image of “happy laughter pouring from the open window of the cultural accommodation” as the poet Kim Ch’ŏl did in 1956.

Another common element used to demonstrate the “beautiful life” of Soviet workers was the frequent depictions of banquets the Korean writers enjoyed in Soviet factories. For example, visiting the GAZ plant in Gorky City, Yi Ki-yŏng mentioned a sumptuous dinner he had enjoyed in the factory cafeteria. Yi implied that this feast represented a regular meal for common workers in the plant, which was certainly not the case, and ascribed its possibility to the endless benevolence of the Soviet state which cared about its workers so totally.


195 Yi Ki-yŏng, Ttang [Land], Pyongyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, 1955, 343.
198 Ch’oe Ch’ang-man, “Onŏldo ch’ŏngsanbŏle kyesine uri suryŏngnim” [Even Today Our Leader Is in Ch’ŏngsanpŏl], in Pit’nanun rojŏng, 107.
200 Yi Ki-yŏng, Kongsanjŭi t’aeyang-ŭn pit’nanda, 72.
The images of an abundance of food and scenes of happy family/neighbourhood feasts which are relatively rare in Soviet prose or poetry of the Stalin era, became popular in North Korean literature from the very outset. Yi Ki-yŏng in his novel Land (Ttang) (1949), in order to demonstrate the socialist achievements of the DPRK barely one year after Liberation, carefully described the scenes of lavish celebration, complete with lists of served dishes.

However such scenes have practically disappeared in the North Korean literature of the 1990s which have taken a more ascetic approach, reflecting the revered “konan-ūi haengun” (“march of hardships”). In recently published Pyongyang anthologies which ritualistically extol “the achievements of socialism”, one can also find works which exhort Korean people not to complain about food shortages, not to waste a grain of precious rice and to unite around the Great Leader even more closely. Look, for example, at the recommendations of Han Chŏng-gyu in his poem “Chasikdŭl-ege chaju hanŭn mal” (“The Words Which I Often Say to My Children”):

“Though today we all keenly sense what rice means to us,
Though we have all suffered during the brief “march of hardships”,
My family members, do not say that it is hard!
Do not waste an ear of rice in the fields,
A grain of rice in your homes!
Remember what our leader said:
“Rice is socialism!””

The author then advises his readers to “sing and dance merrily” despite their bellies not being full and not to ask for rice from “mother Korea” in order to “save socialism which others could not save”.

The most problematic constituent of the Soviet “industrial miracle” was the horrible price which the Soviet people were forced to pay for it, or, to be more precise, the scale of human sacrifice which the Stalinist regime exacted from its people. It is remarkable how eulogists of “socialist construction” managed to hush up the issue of the human price of “economic miracles” or reinterpret this as expressions of enthusiasm and willing self-sacrifice by the Soviet people. For instance, Yi Ki-yŏng devoted an entire chapter of his book to the glorification of the “heroic construction” of the Volga-Don canal allegedly undertaken by the willing and creative labour of the masses. In reality, the construction of the Volga-Don canal was the result of the slave labour of prisoners from Stalin’s GULAG whose numbers reached an astonishing

---

201 Soviet authors on the contrary tended to stress the simplicity of the food which their heroes enjoyed. See, for instance, Yuri Trifonov, Students [Students], in Sobranie sochinenii [Collected works], Moscow: Hudozhestvennaia literatura, 1985, Vol. 1: 68-70, 158, 200.
202 Yi Ki-yŏng, Ttang [Land], 100, 200-211, 377-384.
203 Han Chŏng-gyu, Chasikdŭl-ege chaju hanŭn mal. [The Words Which I Often Say to My Children], in Pit’nan’ŭn rojŏng, 130-132.
204 Yi Ki-yŏng, Kongsanjuŭi t’aeyang-ŭn pit’nanda, 23-30.
118,000 by January 1952, shortly before the project’s completion. Thus, Yi’s enthusiastic notion that “this kind of project could be possible only in the Soviet Union” had a touch of bitter irony.

Yun Tu-hŏn delivers another characteristic tale. While travelling in Tajikistan, he saw an artificial lake near Dushanbe. His guides said that the lake was dug literally with the “bare hands of young communists”: the land was allegedly too bad to be dug with spades, and the young communist workers used their hands to create the lake.

Yun Tu-hŏn did not suspect (or, at least, did not reveal his suspicions if he had any) that the most probable reason for digging the lake with bare hands was not the enthusiasm of the Communist workers, but a scarcity of earth-moving equipment. The episode presents a characteristic example of Stalinist propaganda—the tendency to make virtues out of miserable necessity and eulogise sacrifices and physical sufferings as immanent attributes of virtually any work in a Communist society. This notion was also popular in the Soviet literature as the official classic How The Steel Was Tempered by Ostrovskii (1932) will attest.

In the North Korean discourse, this type of propagandistic cliché eventually became a special favourite. For instance in his novel Tiang (Land), Yi Ki-yŏng depicted the protagonists as draining marches and working the fields with their bare hands or with heavy, unwieldy tools. He stressed this as a particular virtue, as an indication of their industriousness and readiness to work eagerly, not caring about themselves. Even the slightest attempt of a North Korean literary hero to consider his/her physical or personal needs was treated as evidence of “reactionary tendencies”. In 1953 Song Yŏng wrote the play “Tu Ch’ŏnyŏ” (“Two Girls”) which dealt with the post-war reconstruction of a village. One of the protagonists, a young girl who had been sent to a rural area, at first feels uncomfortable and lonely in the village and wants to return home. Then she overcomes her negative feelings and starts to work enthusiastically. Despite the sugary exemplariness of the entire situation, Song Yŏng quickly receives a critical reprimand. The critic Kim Myŏng-su claims that the positive heroine should not feel this way and express such “petty-bourgeois feelings”.

Or take, for instance, the representative novel of Sŏk In-hae entitled “Maŭl-ŭi nyŏsŏnsaeng” (“Female Village Teacher”) (1956) in which the female protagonist, a village teacher, organises the “voluntary” work of her colleagues and pupils in the construction of a new school building. Though the labour was considered to be

---


206 K‘unak’in uŭi, 122.

207 Yi Ki-yŏng, Tiang, 156-161.

208 Song Yŏng, “Tu ch’ŏnyŏ” [Two Girls], Munhak yesul, 1953, #9, 65-79.

209 Kim Myŏng-su, “Uiri munhak-e issŏsŏŭi chŏnhyŏng-kwa kaldŭn munje” [The Problems of Typicality and Conflict in Our Literature], Chosŏn munhak, 1953, #11, 135-137.

210 Sŏk In-hae, “Maŭl-ŭi nyŏsŏnsaeng” [Female Village Teacher], Chosŏn munhak, 1956 #8, 80-112.
voluntary, to be done after normal hours, a male colleague who attempted to avoid it for personal reasons was publicly criticised as a "hostile element". An enthusiastic schoolboy was injured at the construction site and his mother expressed anger at the carelessness of his supervising teacher. This episode is presented as a harassment of the progressive heroine who is enveloped in the lofty ideals of socialist revolution while the mother’s line of reasoning is not even discussed.

In general the motif of enthusiastic workers who, while working, have to overcome enormous obstacles and may even die in the process was widely promoted in North Korean literature. One of the earliest examples of this "martyr syndrome" is a short story by Pyǒn Hǔi-gǔn entitled "Haengbokhan Saramdǔl" ("Happy People") (1953)\(^{211}\) in which the female worker protagonist T’an-sil, during an American air raid on her factory, saves the factory equipment (an electric furnace) and receives serious facial injuries. Though her mutilation turned out to be irreversible, her fiancée, the exemplary fighter Ch’ang-sǒn, loved her even more. He claimed that: “You, comrade, have saved an electric furnace from enemy attack, sacrificing for that your flower-like face. This is such a wonderful and proud deed! The scars on your face do not matter. What really matters is how deeply you love the country, what a beautiful and noble heart you have. I am really happy to love such a wonderful girl”. The young man makes a vow to defeat the wicked enemy and “to return to you, comrade, and to the electrical furnace that you have saved”.\(^{212}\)

This tendency of North Korean literature has continued to the present day. A minor character in the contemporary short story “Tonggabi” ("Person of the Same Age") heroically dies on a construction site. The author Chǒng Ok-sǒn obliquely hints that the death occurred at some “critical moment” and that the young hero “gave his life for his friends, without any hesitation”.\(^{213}\) Another short story by Yang Chae-mo, “Nop’ǔn mokp’yo” ("Lofty Goal"), depicts a talented young doctor Yun who, after graduation from university, does not remain in Pyongyang, but enthusiastically chooses to work in a small provincial town hospital with no proper medicines or equipment. This becomes his “lofty goal”.\(^{214}\)

It is curious that North Korean policymakers, as well as their Soviet predecessors, do not notice the major contradiction between two essential elements of this particular Communist idyll. On the one hand, a socialist worker is supposed to enjoy a wealthy and comfortable lifestyle as a result of socialist prosperity and the unwavering care of the Party. On the other, the exemplary worker is expected to endure all manner of hardships or, even better, heroically die battling impossible odds.

\textit{The USSR has the most progressive agricultural system in the world.}

\(^{211}\) Pyǒn Hǔi-gǔn, “Haengbokhan saramdǔl” [Happy People], Munhak Yesul, 1953, #6, 75-85.

\(^{212}\) Ibid., 85.

\(^{213}\) Chǒng Ok-sǒn, “Tonggabi” [Person of the Same Age], in Pit’nanǔn rojŏng [Brilliant course], Pyongyang: Munhakyesul chonghap ch’ulp’ansa, 1998, 260

\(^{214}\) Yang Chae-mo, “Nop’ǔn mokp’yo” [Lofty Goal], in Pitnanǔn rojŏng, 304-323.
Another range of widely exaggerated tales in the travelogues referred to the well-being of the workers in the Soviet kolkhozes or collective farms. Given the miserable reality of Soviet rural areas, this fiction was grotesque.\(^\text{215}\) For instance, Yi Ki-yŏng, after visiting the “typical” Ukrainian collective farm, wrote that for one “working day” (Rus. trudoden’) a Soviet farmer received a kilo and a half of flour, two kilos of potatoes and a sum of money.\(^\text{216}\) Hong Kŏn relates the story of some “ordinary farmer” in Abhasia in Georgia who allegedly earned 50,000 roubles for the previous year and spent this enormous income in the following manner: “I bought a new Pobeda (a large passenger car – T.G.) and constructed a two-storey house. The remaining money I just wasted”.\(^\text{217}\) The poet Kim Sun-sŏk relates a similarly false interview with an allegedly “ordinary” farmer from a kolkhoz near Stalingrad: ”Last year I spent 8 thousand roubles on a car. There are a lot of private cars on our collective farm”.\(^\text{218}\)

The life of Soviet farmers, as it is presented in the travelogues, is not just prosperous but also economically free, technologically advanced and highly cultured. Needless to say, these were a gross exaggeration: the post-war reality of the Soviet village was very different.\(^\text{219}\) Yi Ki-yŏng claimed that Soviet collective farms allegedly

---

\(^{215}\) 1946-1947 was in fact a time of acute food shortages in the Soviet Union which are often described as “famine” by modern historians of the USSR. The famine hit rural areas with a particular ferocity. According to recently available data, in 1946-1947 some 100 million Soviet people were severely malnourished and up to 2 million died of hunger and related diseases. For a review of food shortages and famine in post-war USSR see: V. F. Zima, Golod v SSSR 1945-1947 godov: proishozhdenie i posledstvia [The Famine in the USSR in 1946-1947: its Origins and Impact], Moscow: IRI, 1996.

\(^{216}\) Yi Ki-yŏng, Kongsanjuui t’aeyang-ün pit’anda, 98. In the real life of Soviet kolkhozes, “working days” (“trudodni”) were records in accounting books. The Soviet farmers used to call “trudodni” derogatorily “little sticks” (palochki). In most cases the “working days” were repaid in kind with small portions of grain, but too often farmers received nothing. According to the official data (classified at the time, but still probably over-optimistic), in 1946 75.8% of all Soviet kolkhozes provided their members with less than 1 kg of grain per working day, and 7.7% kolkhoz paid nothing, leaving their members to their own devices entirely. (See: Elena Zubkova, Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obschestvo: politika i posvednevnost’ 1945-1953 [Postwar Soviet Society: Politics and Everyday Life in 1945-1953], 61-62). This is why an ironic rhyme, popular among the Soviet farmers at the time, said: ”Proletarians of the world, unite! Treat yourself 100 grams of bread a day, don’t hesitate!” Apart from this impossibly exaggerated amount of grain, the potatoes and other vegetables which Yi Ki-yŏng mentioned as compensation, were seldom given for “working days” – the farmers were supposed to grow these themselves, in their tiny backyard patches after a full-day’s work on the kolkhoz.

\(^{217}\) K’inak’ŭn uui, 151-152.

\(^{218}\) Ibid., 215.

\(^{219}\) In 1949 Olga Berggolts, the then famous Soviet poetess, spent a few weeks in a village located between Moscow and Leningrad (that is, in a relatively prosperous part of the country) and wrote in her diary: “The sowing has been transformed into the hardest, almost penal, corvee: the authorities exert great pressure in regards to the time and area [to be sown] while there is nothing to use for ploughing—few horses (14 horses for 240 households) and merely two tractors. The women used hoes to prepare the fields for wheat […] Yesterday I saw women dragging a plough themselves” (cited in Elena Zubkova, Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obschestvo:
sold milk and meat at the local market and distributed the profits among the collective farm members. The writer waxed lyrical about Soviet miracle machines for potato harvesting and modern tractors which he saw on a Ukrainian collective farm, and marvelled at the TV system in the kolkhoz’s school.\textsuperscript{221} The poet Kim Sun-sǒk eagerly reiterates the words of the members of another Soviet collective farm: “Thanks to the care of the Party and the Government, we all received bright and modern houses. Every evening they show movies in our club. There is a radio, a telephone, and an electrical heating system in every house. There is no difference between the city and rural lifestyles in our country.”\textsuperscript{222} Yi Ki-yǒng also concludes that: “The cities and the rural communities in the Soviet Union have the same quality of life. The only distinction between them is the beauty of nature in the countryside that cannot be found in big cities”.\textsuperscript{223} Both propagandists obviously implied that it was only the “beauty of nature” that held farmers to the countryside.\textsuperscript{224}

This false image of the affluent Soviet village was greatly reinforced by the contemporary Soviet literature. S. Babaevski, who specialized in sugary depictions of booming villages, became one of the first winners of the Stalin Prize for literature, at that time the most prestigious official award in the USSR. However, Stalinist literature did not always present the rural situation in such an idealized a manner as the Soviet hosts presented it before their Korean visitors. Soviet “agricultural” novels, such as A. Musatov’s \textit{Stozhary} (1948), V. Panova’s \textit{Kruzhiila} (1950), or G. Nikolaeva’s \textit{Zhatva (Harvesting)} (1950), despite their generally triumphalistic tone, occasionally referred to material hardships and concealed social discontent (under the label of “class struggle”) in Soviet kolkhozes. Perhaps unwittingly, the Soviet novels also made some reference to what can be described as “deviant behaviour” of farmers or to material hardships in the post-war village. This was even more common in earlier eras. In the 1930s,

\begin{flushright}
\textit{politika i povsednevnost’} 1945-1953, 69. This was written at the very time the Korean visitors were busy praising the feats of the Soviet agrarian technology.
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{220} By spreading this falsehood, Soviet propagandists intended to invent parallels between kolkhozes and farmers’ co-operatives in capitalist countries – a propagandistic leitmotif which is also prominent in Sholokhov’s \textit{Podniataia Tselina} [Virgin Land Under the Plough] (1932), a famous Soviet saga of agricultural reform. (See M. Sholokhov, \textit{Podniataia tselina} [Virgin Land Under the Plough], Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1973, 123, 221).

\textsuperscript{221} Yi Ki-yǒng, \textit{Kongsanjuĩĩ i’aeyang-ũn pit’nanda}, 101-103.

\textsuperscript{222} \textit{K’inak ŋun uĩi}, 215.

\textsuperscript{223} Yi Ki-yǒng, \textit{Kongsanjuĩĩ i’aeyang-ũn pit’nanda}, 104.

\textsuperscript{224} Nothing could be further from the truth. It was not the beauty of nature which tied Soviet collective farmers to the rural areas but a strictly enforced system of administrative controls. Unlike the urban dwellers of the Soviet Union, collective farmers did not even have their own ID and thus were not able to move freely around the country or get regular employment outside their native village. In later eras the dissidents often described the system as a “new serfdom” and they were not too far off the mark. For more information on the control of population movement, see: 70-letie sovetskogo pasporta. [“The 70th anniversary of the Soviet passport”], Demoscope-weekly, #93, 2002. (http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2002/093/arxiv01.php, retrieved in December 2003).
collectivization novels (and most prominently, Sholokhov’s *Virgin Land*) provided anything but a bucolic depiction of happy village life.

In contrast, the North Korean works on rural subjects, which constituted the lion’s share of all the literary works of the DPRK, presented the reality of the newly created “co-operatives” as an implausible harmony, a paradise for voluntarily united peasants, despite the fact that the reality of the North Korean village in the 1950s was even harsher than the Soviet one.\(^{225}\) No social problems are mentioned in North Korean agrarian novels; all farmers are depicted as “simple-minded” (the much-trumpeted “sobakham”) but honest people working towards common goals. These traits were noted by Brian Myers in relation to Han Sŏr-ya’s writings on agrarian topics, but they are equally identifiable in the works of other North Korean writers of the era. The protagonists of Yi Ki-yŏng’s *Land* enthusiastically work for the common good and selflessly deliver “patriotic rice”. The vast majority of the heroes in Ch’ŏn Se-pong’s novel “Sŏkkaeul-ŭi saebom” ("New Spring in Sŏkkaeul")\(^{226}\) eagerly and happily work on the land. The conflicts, if they appeared at all in these chocolate-box environments, are so childishly innocuous as to scarcely bother anybody. Take for instance the short story by Pak Hyo-jun, “So” ("Ox") (1956).\(^{227}\) The protagonist, the elderly farmer Un-bo, does not want to pool his precious ox with the co-operative because he is not sure whether the other farmers would take proper care of it. His son, a conscious and enthusiastic collectivist, is trying to convince his father that the co-operative needs the ox to achieve a good harvest and that the ox would be cared for by everyone in the collective, “as if it were their own”. The ox finally goes to the collective farm. The co-operative achieves a good harvest, and the old farmer relaxes when he discovers that the ox receives good care at the hands of the other members of the co-operative. In the end Un-bo becomes an enthusiastic supporter of the collective farm. As we can see, all the problems of the North Korean post-war village in the story are narrowed to the peculiar stubbornness of an old man which quickly gives way to the “norm” of collective consciousness and progressive thinking. No reference is made to the actual

\(^{225}\) During his meeting with a senior Soviet diplomat, Yi P’il-gyu, then a prominent North Korean statesman, in 1956 described the situation in contemporary Korean villages in the following manner: "Farmers comprise eighty percent of the population of [North] Korea. After Liberation they were offered an excellent opportunity for a better life, however they remain very poor. The government has been following an incorrect taxation policy. During the past ten years, instead of 23-27% tax, they have been taking more than 50% from the farmers. Such a policy continues to this day. It is not necessary to recount the methods employed in 1954-1955 to gather taxes. Tax-collecting was accompanied by beatings, murders, and arrests. The Party's activities are based on violence, not persuasion. The co-operative movement is based on violence. The workers live poorly, [they] do not have enough grain or soy beans. The intellectuals and students live in difficult conditions. " (Document kindly provided by Andrei Lankov, to be quoted at greater length in his forthcoming book, 1956: Failure of de-Stalinization in the DPRK, to be published by Hawaii University Press in Honolulu).

\(^{226}\) Ch’ŏn Se-pong, “Sŏkkaeul-ŭi saebom” ("New Spring in Sŏkkaeul"), *Chosŏn munhak*, 1956, #6, 21-64.

\(^{227}\) Pak Hyo-jun, “So” [Ox], *Chosŏn munhak*, 1956, #3, 16-44.
resistance or discontent of the farmers, and no mention of the real material problems of North Korean villages can be found in this type of writing.

However, in the North Korean literature of the 1990s, the depiction of village life has changed. Despite an abundance of the still popular images of “fields of gold” and the “aroma of fruit gardens” as symbols of an allegedly prosperous rural life,228 “clean houses with snow white walls” and “bathrooms with bathtubs” as signs of cultured lifestyles,229 or references to the “blooming people’s paradise” of Korean village,230 the earlier pattern of the complete harmony of rural life began to deteriorate. This process is visible, for instance, in the short story of Chŏng Ok-sŏn, “Tonggabi” (“Person of the Same Age”).231 The protagonist of this story Yŏng-jin, who is studying in Pyongyang, hesitates about returning to his home village after graduation. His female classmate Hye-yŏng, a pretty fashion-lover who is now living in a provincial town with her uncle’s family, is definitely against the idea. When both meet in their home village where the student returns for vacation, the girl makes it clear that she would do anything to remain in town. Yŏng-jin is not so sure. He is ashamed of his yearning to become a city-slicker and feels that in a moral sense it would be more honest to return home and face the hardships of life in the province. Several meetings with the mother of his late classmate, a classmate who had lived in exemplary fashion and died heroically on a construction site, and another with a city girl of the same age who had come to their home village to work and struggle with difficulty, inspired him. Yŏng-jin understood that “it is time to march in front ranks of the century. I have no right to be a straggler on the general course of the “march of hardships,” as proclaimed by our glorious Leader”.

As we can see, despite the obligatory upbeat tone and predictable outcome, the story mentions the real troubles of the village and the unwillingness of the young people to remain there. Thus, the previous pattern of an agricultural paradise is visibly blurring in recent North Korean literature.

The USSR is an educational and cultural paradise

It comes as no surprise that the visitors from Korea, with its deep-rooted Confucian reverence for education, frequently extolled the high cultural level and rich intellectual life of the Soviet citizens, eagerly describing wonderful Soviet universities, public libraries, theatres and museums.232 Their presentation of this aspect of Soviet life

228 Pak Chŏng-ae, “Nae kohyang-ŭi irŭm” [The Name of My Home Town], in Yŏngwŏnhan Noŭl, 101-103; Ch’oe Ch’ang-man, “Ontŭdo Ch’ŏngsanbŏle kyesine uri suryŏngnim”, 107-109.

229 Sŏng Man-sil, “Sinjŏng maŭl-ŭi haengbokhan pamilyŏ” [Happy Night in a New Village], in Yŏngwŏnhan Noŭl, 128-129.


232 Yi Ki-yŏng, Kongsanjuŭi i’aeyang-ŭn pit’nanda, 158-163.
was not strictly false: indeed, the Soviet system of free university education, a well-developed system of student scholarships, ballet theatres, numerous libraries and museums represented real achievements of Soviet socialism. Yet, even these true achievements were often presented with gross propagandistic overstatement. For instance, Hon Kôn reported that every student in Moscow State University allegedly lived in a separate room, each room being 8 p’yông; that PhD students enjoyed separate rooms with telephones and each room was 12 p’yông. Every room allegedly had a kitchen and a bathroom—and all for a monthly fee of a mere 15 roubles. According to Yi Ki-yông the student dormitory in the Moscow State University looked “like a first class hotel”. The rector of this “palace of science” (the then standard Soviet cliché which Yi eagerly utilised) mentioned that from now on “all the students of the university will live in separate rooms so as not to disturb each other’s studying” since “sharing a room with another student must be a very uncomfortable practice, so the university does not use it”. Quite expectedly, all of these pluses of the Soviet educational system in the travelogues were also contrasted with alleged shortcomings in the capitalist world. Yi Ki-yông stressed, for instance, that in capitalist countries like the USA or Great Britain most working people suffered from exploitation and even illiteracy, since even primary schools in the capitalist world, unlike the Soviet “educational paradise”, were allegedly too costly for ordinary people.

In general, the USSR was presented as a highly developed country which was enveloped in an educational zeal, and the North Korean writers in their travelogues appeared to express a particular admiration for this. Surprisingly, the self-image of Korea in its own literature, rather than mirroring the Soviet propagandistic self-image, was different. The cultural aspects, the lives of students and intelligentsia, and the idea of the DPRK as a “cultural/educational paradise” are much less prominent in the propagandistic self-image of North Korea.

While Soviet Stalinist novels often depicted college and university students, their everyday life and problems (take, for instance, the popular and officially acclaimed novel by Yuri Trifonov, Studenty (Students) (1951)), the protagonist of North Korean poems and novels was rarely a full-time student, let alone one enjoying the comfort of a

---

233 K’unok’ân uîi, 133-137.

234 Yi Ki-yông, Kongsanjuui t’aeyang-ân pit’nanda, 42. Of course the reality of Soviet dormitories was different. Given the fact that separate bathrooms and kitchens were an unbelievable extravagance even for most Soviet families, the cohabitation of 20-25 students in the same room was the norm in most university dormitories at the time. At the highly privileged Moscow State University, the number of students sharing the same room, of course, might be smaller. But providing every student with a separate room would be beyond the means even of the most prestigious Soviet universities of the 1950s. Only foreign students could sometimes enjoy this luxury. (Interviews by telephone with Valentina Lankova (Moscow, 22 October 2002) Leo Kontsevich (03 September 2002), Valeri and Irina Gabroussenko (Novosibirsk, 5 November 2003), Novosibirsk, 5 November 2003), all of whom were students of major Soviet colleges and universities from the late 1940s through the late 1950s).

235 Yi Ki-yông, Kongsanjuui t’aeyang-ân pit’nanda, 160.
separate dormitory room. This is especially significant if we take into account the fact that students returning from Japan were favourite heroes in pre-Liberation Korean novels. The academic activity or studies of the North Korean literary hero, if mentioned at all, always followed some long-term engagement in physical labour in industry or agriculture (see, for example, the poem Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, “Huip’aram” (“Whistle”)), 236 or was considered to be only a preparation for such work (Han Sŏr-ya, “T’an’gaengch’ŏn” (“Mining Settlement”)). 237

The Soviet Stalinist literature produced a large number of works about “progressive intelligentsia”, i.e. Soviet scientists, teachers or writers. Their work was described in greater detail and often constituted one major storyline of a particular novel (see, for instance, K. Lokotkov’s Vernost’ (Loyalty) (1951), 238 Vadim Ohotnikov’s Dorogi vglub’ (Roads to the Depth) (1950), 239 or Frida Vigdorova’s Moi Klass (My Class) (1949) 240). Scientists, engineers and university professors were among the favourite characters of the Soviet fiction of the 1940s and 1950s. In contrast, contemporary North Korean literature seldom dealt with intellectuals. On the rare occasions when the protagonist happened to be an educated person, his/her activity is either overburdened with raw political motives, or has little to do with intellectual work at all. Take, for instance, the short story of Sŏk In-hae “Maül-ŭi nyŏsŏnŏsŏng” (“Female Village Teacher”) (1956), 241 whose main protagonist, the female village teacher Yong-ae, is largely preoccupied with the construction of a new school building, overcoming difficulties and repelling “reactionary elements”. Only once in this quite lengthy story is Yong-ae shown engaged in her professional activity: she reads with her students a long propagandistic text about the “wicked Americans” and “brave Koreans”, which is generously quoted by the author.

The tendency to neglect or downplay the intellectual activity of the characters is also visible in North Korean literature of the 1990s. In the short story of Yang Chae-mo, “Nop’un Mokp’yo” (“Lofty Goal”), 242 the characters, who are provincial doctors, are never depicted studying or working. Instead they indulge in lengthy political and moral discussions, one of the main postulates of which is that “real education is not to be found in books but in work among the people”. The same tendency to belittle intellectual work is palpable in the above-mentioned story of Chŏng Ok-sŏn, “Person of the Same Age” 243 in which the protagonist, a student, feels deeply inferior before the

237 Concerning this short story, read Brian Myers, Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean literature, 54-60.
238 K. Lokotkov, Vernost’ [Loyalty], Novosibirsk: Novosibirskoe knizhnoe isdatel’stvo, 1951.
239 Vadim Ohotnikov, Dorogi vglub’ [Roads to the Depth], Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1950.
240 Frida Vigdorova, Moi class [My Class], Novosibirsk: Novosibirskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1951.
241 Sŏk In-hae, “Maül-ŭi nyŏsŏnŏsŏng”, 80-112.