

## WHEN ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

### *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea*

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By Suk-Young Kim  
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Review by John Feffer

Most studies of film and theater, when they try to make larger statements about the social and political elements embedded in the movies or performances they cite, must carefully qualify their conclusions. *Citizen Kane* and *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* all reflect the times that produced them. But they are also idiosyncratic works that yield different interpretations and betray often-contradictory political influences. Even works from the Soviet Union and Communist China, like *Solaris* or *Red Sorghum*, are far from cookie-cutter movies that adhere to some easily defined party line.

North Korean films and theater performances are a different story. As Suk-Young Kim outlines in her provocative new book *Illusive Utopia*, the North Korean government, from its very inception, used film and theater as a tool to build a new society according to a very specific template. Perhaps more than any other government in history, the North Korean government has been able to "stay on message" with its state-controlled film and theater industry. As such, these productions offer insights into North Korean society that are largely undistorted by the creative impulses of individual dramatists or directors. There is one big exception to this rule, which proves one of the most fascinating chapters in *Illusive Utopia*, but more on that in a moment.

As Kim writes, the North Korean government realized, early on, the revolutionary potential of film. Here was a medium that the state could control in its entirety, from production to consumption. There would be no room for regional variation or individualistic interpretation, as might happen with the production of plays. Films could portray the government's political line in dramatic form — for easier consumption by the masses — and provide models of behavior for individuals to follow.

"For North Korean people, transforming daily lives into rehearsals dictates the precise inscription of the correct modes of self-presentation onto their bodies," she writes. As the modern army literally shapes the bodies of soldiers, so do North Korea films, theater and mass spectacles shape the bodies of North Koreans. In other words, what is considered a mode of self-expression in other countries becomes a mode of social control in North Korea. Here, it might have been interesting for Kim to investigate the influence of Japanese *kata* — the prescribed series of movements that underlie endeavors from karate and flower-arranging to *kabuki* and bowing — in the same way that she analyzes the impact of *shimpa*, an early 20th-century variety of Japanese drama.

Film and theater have also served to bolster the personality cult of Il-Sung Kim, the founding father of North Korea. The revolutionary operas attributed to him — such as *Flower Girl* and *Sea of Blood* — serve to demonstrate his creative control over the arts. Transformed into movies that are shown in every corner of the country, these operas provide a homogenized version of North Korean history and a very specific set of rules of social conduct.

They also provide the outside critic a kind of swab of North Korean genetic material, so to speak, from which the society's DNA can be assessed. For instance, the films portray Pyongyang's cityscape as a utopian landscape, father figures as heroic representations of Kim Il Sung and women as the untainted bearers of national essence. These archetypal representations vary in only minor ways from film to film.

Moreover, there is no irony in these productions. There are no multiple tiers of meaning, though as Kim points out, interesting details almost inadvertently reveal themselves to the careful observer. For instance, some productions from rural collectives incorporate earthier and more sexual content that is entirely absent from the air-brushed national productions. Otherwise, the films and plays faithfully reflect the party line at the time, whether they describe the need to rebuild the cities after the Korean War or encourage the people to redouble their efforts to increase agricultural production.

The homogeneity of North Korean productions have served the state well — up to a point. At a certain stage, the presumptive heir to the leadership, Il-Sung Kim's son Jong Il Kim, realized that the film tradition had hit a dead end. The younger Kim has long been a film buff who first gained prominence in the system by directing films that solidified his father's personality cult. Although North Korean productions early on showed evidence of Soviet influence, the films had acquired a sameness that threatened to undercut their potential to inspire audiences along revolutionary lines.

It was at this point that Jong Il Kim took the unprecedented step of abducting a famous South Korean film director Sang-ok Sin and his actress wife Eun-hui

Choe. The couple produced seven films in eight years, until they escaped in 1986. During that time, Sin and Choe "started making films drastically different from previous North Korean films, with a faster tempo, rhythmic editing, and a realistic acting style," the author notes. Their influence can be seen even today in films like *School Girl's Diary*, with its faster pace and its morally ambiguous main character.

Kim's nuanced and always interesting analysis of North Korean films and theater offers a remarkable window onto a society that has largely resisted the prying eyes of outsiders. She notes in an appendix that "the real challenge in researching North Korea emerges not from the dearth of available materials, but from the overabundance of primary sources begging for researchers' attention."

The problem, however, is that those who scrutinize North Korea tend to overlook this rich trove of cultural artifacts that Kim analyzes; thus, they miss out on perhaps the most important way that the North Korean government reveals itself, both intentionally and unintentionally.

When Kim strays from her specialty, the analysis becomes somewhat thinner. Her discussion of tourism and human rights — as further arenas for performances of a different type — lapses into occasional problems. She writes, for instance, that "as the North Korean state silently eliminates undesired bodies when coping with food crises, it simultaneously spins the wheel of lucrative tourism while it forces silence upon tourists, an invisible way of exercising a minor degree of violence." But many of the victims of the food crisis were Party members, true believers who refused to engage in market activities and then fell victim when the government's food distribution system collapsed — these were not "undesired bodies."

shown this food crisis as a kind of performance gone awry, as when the director has lost authority over the actors, and the audience suddenly has a chance to see what's going on behind the scenes.

The book might also have benefited from some comparisons between North and South Korean cinema. There are many parallels between the respective authoritarian cultures of North and South Korea during the 1960s and 1970s: The similarities of the agricultural modernization programs, for instance, or the appropriation of ethnic nationalism to boost the flagging legitimacy of the state. It would have been interesting to see how similar state policies were reflected in the respective film and theater cultures of the two Koreas.

Finally, although Kim interviews 16 defectors, the book doesn't quite capture the evolution of how audiences have received North Korean movies. She writes at some length about how ordinary North Korean citizens performed the roles they saw in films in their daily lives. The actors in the films served as role models: Model workers, model farmers, model revolutionaries. So, ordinary citizens often tried to embody these virtues by replaying these roles in their day-to-day work. There have even been amateur contests to see who could best depict "flower girl" or other iconic roles.

But as the economy deteriorated, surely the reception of these films changed as well. For instance, many important North Korean productions featured characters who must act one way in public and another way covertly — such as the villager living under Japanese occupation in *Sea of Blood* who is a secret revolutionary but must be pro-Japanese in public. Do North Koreans today read a very different message into this role if, for instance, they are pro-regime in public but revolutionary in a very different way in private?

Farther on, she writes that “instead of openly seeking the international community’s help, the North Korean state handled the disaster by keeping the situation under cover and making it invisible to the outside world.” In fact, the North Korean state appealed to international authorities as early as 1990 and later invited in international observers to see hungry people in order to gain more aid. A more fine-grained analysis would have

These missed opportunities notwithstanding, *Illusive Utopia* is a tremendous accomplishment. To understand the motivations of the North Korean government — but more importantly to understand the education of ordinary North Korean people — this analysis of the performances of actors and citizens alike is an indispensable guide to any future political and economic order on the Korean peninsula. ❦