



SOAP OPERAS AND SOCIALISM: DISSECTING KIM JONG-UN'S EVOLVING POLICY PRIORITIES THROUGH TV DRAMAS IN NORTH KOREA

By Jean Lee

Abstract

Romance, humor, tension — everyone loves a good sitcom, even North Koreans. But in North Korea, TV dramas are more than mere entertainment. They play a crucial political role by serving as a key messenger of party and government policy. They aim to shape social and cultural mores in North Korean society. And in the Kim Jong-un era, they act as an advertisement for the “good life” promised to the political elite. Through TV dramas, the North Korean people learn what the regime says constitutes being a good citizen in Kim Jong-un’s North Korea today: showing loyalty to the party, using science and technology to advance national interests, thinking creatively in problem-solving, and facing the nation’s continued economic hardships with a positive attitude. The soaps and sitcoms reveal a shift in social priorities: Viewers are encouraged to put their families first, to nurture and elevate the next generation, and to be bold in thinking outside the box rather than settling for the status quo. These contrast with themes popular in films made during the Kim Jong-il era, which emphasized putting the state before family, the military above the party, and conformism over originality. The props in today’s dramas, including laptops, drones, fashionable clothes, and gold wristwatches, are prominently positioned in such settings as elevators, computer labs, and newly built high-rise apartment buildings. These consumer products are the arsenal of the new generation of Kim Jong-un elites — not the tanks and rifles of his father’s era of filmmaking.

Key Words: *Propaganda, media, entertainment, daily life, sports, science, youth, Kim Jong-un.*

Introduction

Much has been written about North Korea’s film industry, the beloved pet project of the late leader Kim Jong-il, who went to extreme lengths — including kidnapping his favorite South Korean movie director and actress in 1978¹ — and lavishing millions on films in order to bring his cinematic fantasies to life.² However, since Kim Jong-il’s death in December 2011, this once-mighty arm of North Korea’s propaganda arts appears to have languished under the rule of his millennial son Kim Jong-un. In 2011, the last year of Kim Jong-il’s life, state-run film studios released 10 feature films.³ In contrast, only one film was released in 2013 as Kim Jong-un’s new propaganda imperatives began to take shape,⁴ while the newly renamed TV Drama Studio⁵ produced three TV movies that year.⁶ It seems that the son, like so many in South Korea and the West, prefers TV dramas.

Movies have played a key role in furthering propaganda in North Korea since the time of Kim Il-sung, a strong believer in the persuasive power of performance, presented the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s inaugural film, *My Home Village*, in 1949,⁷ less than a year after becoming the country’s first president. While being groomed to succeed his father, Kim Jong-il served for years as the regime’s chief propagandist, focusing on reinforcing Kim family rule — and overseeing the making of movies, sometimes dozens a year.⁸ “The cinema occupies an important place in the overall development of art and literature,” Kim Jong-il said in 1987 at the opening of the first Pyongyang International Film Festival. “As such, it is a powerful ideological weapon for the revolution and construction.”⁹ That year,

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North Korea released twenty-four feature films, including the Kim Il-sung ode, *Star of Korea*, all meticulously catalogued, along with detailed box office figures for each province and major city, in a yearly film yearbook.¹⁰

His son Kim Jong-un took the role of film and TV one step beyond mere conveyor of ideology by ordering the state's directors to use media to help shape society. "Socialist art and literature help people to develop a proper outlook on the revolution and life, to nurture ennobling and fine mental and moral traits, and to take an active part in the revolution and construction," Kim Jong-un said at the Seventh Party Congress in May 2016. "They also play an important leading role in social civilization."¹¹

With each change of leadership, there has been a shift in policy, and movies and TV are employed as part of the media campaign to help disseminate the new leader's priorities to his power base.

During his rule, Kim Jong-il elevated the status of the military to ensure the support of North Korea's million-man army. Accordingly, soldiers seeking to win glory on the battlefield in order to show loyalty to Kim Jong-il figure prominently in such military films as *Inheritance*, *The Lieutenant of Those Days*, and *A Day of Training*.¹² "Movies just showed military life or the loyalty of the soldiers for the regime," one defector, referred to as "Miss B," told Johannes Schönherr in an interview for his book, *North Korean Cinema: A History*. "There wasn't anything interesting in those movies. They didn't reflect our daily lives, they were not realistic movies."¹³

Kim Jong-un, who was in his twenties when he succeeded his father, has focused his attention on the youth of North Korea as his future support base. The movies and dramas made during his rule are written to, appeal to, and address, the next generation. The characters are young, bright, clever, loyal and sometimes mischievous — innocuous versions of the leader himself. While Kim Jong-il's propagandists sought to portray the people of North Korea as orphans who should look up to Kim as their surrogate father in the wake of Kim Il-sung's 1994 death, Kim Jong-un is portrayed as their friend and comrade. Under Kim Jong-il, North Koreans were told to put Kim and the state before their own families; today, young North Koreans are being told through dramas to honor their families and to be resourceful in finding their own ways to contribute to building a stronger society. They are being encouraged to use computers and technology to help construct a better future for North Korea — one that includes rockets and missiles.

The four dramas in the following sections, released from 2013 to 2016, serve as representative examples of entertainment-as-propaganda in the Kim Jong-un era. Each features an archetype of the populace Kim wants to cultivate: Pyongyang elites, aspiring athletes, young military officials, and students. Each drama also serves as an advertisement for the party, promoting the vision of what Kim Jong-un wants to see in his people.

The Family Sitcom: *Our Neighbors*

The two-part TV drama *Our Neighbors*, released in 2013,¹⁴ is as close to a sitcom as you'll get in North Korea. It's lighthearted, full of comic characters and slapstick moments, and placed in a familiar setting: an apartment building. *Our Neighbors* is a loose remake of a 2000 series with the same name,¹⁵ but transposed to a shiny new setting: the upscale homes of the Changjon Street neighborhood in Pyongyang's downtown Mansudae District. Changjon Street was the first major construction project unveiled during the Kim Jong-un era. In 2011, while Kim Jong-il was still alive, soldiers razed the neighborhood of ramshackle homes and replaced them with skyscrapers. Construction continued after his death as part of a speed campaign to complete the project in time for the April 2012 celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth. After opening, Changjon Street quickly became the hottest real estate in town. State media touted its slick new elevators and running water — rarities then, even in Pyongyang — as locals privately wondered how reliable the power and water would be.¹⁶

The original residents of Changjon Street were granted apartments in the new high-rises; many of the rest were allocated as political rewards. Photos and footage of Changjon Street served as advertising for the relatively lavish lifestyle people could lead if they worked hard enough for the party to "earn" a spot in this glossy central neighborhood with a view of the bronze statues of the late leaders on Mansu Hill. *Our Neighbors*, in that sense, served as a massive advertisement for the party, wrapped up in an engaging family drama.

The residents of *Our Neighbors* are portrayed as happy, well-dressed Pyongyang proletariat: a truck driver, a music teacher, a doctor, students, and housewives. Their homes may seem outdated to our eyes but would be luxurious to most North Koreans. The apartments are fussily decorated with curtains, clocks, wallpaper, table lamps, flowers and plants — middle-class accoutrement normally out of the reach of most North Koreans.



Tables overflow with food. The men wear flashy gold watches. Notable for those who follow North Korean films: Photos of the late leaders on the walls of these living rooms are never shown; the camera conspicuously pans to family portraits instead. This is a departure from the Kim Jong-il-era practice of giving portraits of the leader's prominence in the living room, while family photos are relegated to the bedroom.

The focal point of their 21-story apartment building is the elevator, a novelty in electricity-starved North Korea. In early April 2012, just days before the unveiling of the Changjon Street skyscrapers, North Korea completed construction on the Huichon hydroelectric power station near Mount Myohyang, northwest of Pyongyang, that was earmarked to provide much of the city's electricity.¹⁷ In *Our Neighbors*, the elevator becomes the new *madang*, or courtyard — a gathering place for the residents. They crowd into the elevator in the mornings to get to work, and rush into the elevator in the evenings to get home in time for the evening news. Keeping tabs on their whereabouts is the elevator operator, who knows who lives where and who's still not home yet.

Once the nosy neighbors learn that their elevator operator, a kind, hard-working middle-aged woman, is single, the residents immediately plot to set her up with one of the new residents, a truck driver who has just moved into the building with his son. The two would-be lovebirds, however, are in no mood to be paired up, leading to plenty of opportunities for comic missteps on the part of the matchmaking neighbors. The storyline allows the outside world to see something we don't often witness: family life in North Korea, albeit highly fictional and idealized. The way the drama is shot creates a sense of intimacy. By shooting on location, rather than on the Korea Film Studio lot, and by using small video cameras, the director can get into smaller spaces, crowding the viewer into the elevator with the neighbors and scrambling into their apartments as they rush home. Video also feels very modern compared to the medium of film, making it the ideal "upgrade" in entertainment technology for Kim Jong-un to support.

There are humanizing moments designed to draw a laugh. In one scene, the women of Changjon Street gossip shamelessly when the truck driver arrives for the first time to move in. They comment on his height (an obsession in North Korea) and his looks, clicking their tongues. He turns around, teasing them

about their rising blood pressure. "What kind of woman do you like?" one wife asks. "One like you," he flirtatiously responds. For a minute, you might think you're watching *The Real Housewives of Pyongyang*. Later, the otherwise manly truck driver comes out into the living room wearing an apron that is clearly too small for him — a gag that would appeal on either side of the DMZ.

Flirtation aside, the scriptwriters have inserted intriguing references to hardship and pointed lessons on how to face them. In one scene, residents are forced to climb the stairs to their apartments when the power goes out. Some are lugging buckets of water. One resident jogs in place outside, joking that "my heart has to be strong if I'm going to walk up all those stairs." It's a remarkable acknowledgment of the persistence of the power and water shortages even in Pyongyang, and a skillful way of addressing the complaints and rumors about the power supply in the new high-rise apartment. The moral: Approach these realities with a smile, and think of it as healthy exercise.

We also get to see how North Koreans are instructed to react to their country's illicit and expensive weapons testing, a program that has deepened their international isolation as well as sanctions. Part 2 opens with the residents of Changjon Street speeding home, into the elevator and gathering around a TV to catch the news one December evening in 2012. We hear the iconic voice of the famed news anchor Ri Chun-hui announcing the successful launch of a long-range rocket.¹⁸ The neighbors cheer and slap their knees, dancing in the living room with their jackets still on. The elevator operator and truck driver forget momentarily that they despise one another and dance in a circle with the driver's son, much to the astonishment of the neighbors. It is a celebration.

The drama also urges viewers to see the omnipresent elevator lady and their neighborhood watch unit, or *inminban*, as a kind of community safety net, not as an intrusion. Yes, the elevator operator knows the details of every family's comings and goings. But her omniscience is portrayed as caring and reassuring, not oppressive. In one scene, residents are summoned to help clear the snow, which the stars of *Our Neighbors* do with good cheer, carrying their homemade wooden shovels. The scene is designed to encourage a kind of camaraderie for onerous civic tasks such as clearing snow or rebuilding roads that are left to the people to handle.

The main lesson in *Our Neighbors* is about unity and harmony that starts at home and extends to the community and to the nation. The drama emphasizes the importance of family, and the merits of collectivism and collaboration. For North Koreans, it is a bold departure from the parables of dramas and films during the Kim Jong-il era, which emphasized putting the state before family. *Our Neighbors* was a way to tell the people that they could, and should, put their families first again, and that unity at home is tantamount to loyalty to the party and state.

The Youth: *Young Researchers*

If *Our Neighbors* is North Korea's version of a prime-time sitcom, then *Young Researchers* is their take on an after-school special. Released in 2013¹⁹ at the height of Kim Jong-un's bid to woo the next generation, this 50-minute drama utilizes some key tools for winning their loyalty: computers, science, technology, and gadgets. The plot: Four of the brightest students at a Pyongyang middle school vie for the top prize in a science competition. Along the way, we get to see some of the capital's best-outfitted computer labs. The objective is to inspire young North Koreans to focus on science, think creatively and competitively, and to put that effort toward a patriotic cause.

Kim Jong-un was just 26 when he was unveiled to the world in 2010 as his father's choice to succeed him as leader. The heir-apparent was also a mystery to the North Korean people, who had to memorize details about their future leader in special study sessions that emphasized his skills in computers and technology. When Kim took power in late 2011, following his father's death, the regime's propagandists rolled out a campaign to portray him as a leader who was loyal to his father and grandfather's legacies — but young and modern in sensibility and strategy.²⁰ That strategy, as we now know, included courting the youth of North Korea and refocusing resources into science, technology, and nuclear weapons. In September 2012, Kim reinforced his focus on the youth by ordering the first major policy change of his rule: extending compulsory education by one year, to 12 years of schooling.²¹

Young Researchers is part of the campaign to justify the shift of resources toward science and technology, and to present that path to the next generation expected to serve as Kim's support base in the decades to come. Every classroom scene, shot at the elite Pyongyang Middle School No. 1,²² is jam-packed with technology: computers, Sony Vaio monitors, microphones,

speakers, telescopes, and recording devices. Chong-song, the boy genius, always has a pair of massive headphones around his neck. In one scene, in which the students go on a hike, he pulls a laptop from his backpack and gets to work calculating the speed of sound — right there on the mountaintop — in what would be impressive to North Koreans who have never used a laptop, much less a desktop computer. Meanwhile, his sidekick, Sun-nam, pulls a prank on two classmates by exploding a balloon filled with confetti over their heads — by using a remote-controlled drone. The message here: If you're going to be mischievous, at least practice your skills in a technology with potential military use. Conspicuous on the wall behind them is a huge poster charting North Korea's plans for long-range rocket technology.

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As in the other films, the smaller details depicting the daily lives of the elite provide valuable insight. The female students are shown attending class in smart white blouses and navy skirts, not the traditional *chima* and *jogori*²³ that students wore up until the end of the Kim Jong-il era. These are modern young women. One very conspicuously shows off her North Korean-made stopwatch, which serves as an advertisement for Pyongyang's nascent consumer products industry. The other, a math whiz, is affectionately dubbed “Encyclopedia” by her classmates. She, in turn, calls the boy genius “Professor Nonsense.” The playfulness among the students is a humanizing display of North Korean teens interacting, teasing and ribbing one another as teenagers everywhere do.

The students' science project proposal is absurdly far-fetched. Their goal is to extract the voices of unknown North Korean martyrs from the caves where they once hid, using science and technology. In reality, it makes no scientific sense. But it's just fictional enough to appeal to students as a fun and fanciful premise for a TV drama. In the end, the students get past schoolyard



squabbles to do their duty as loyal North Koreans by bringing to life their country's fallen patriots. In quick succession during the finale, a series of images emphasizes the show's underlying objective: the top prize, a rocket launch and Juche tower, making a direct correlation between the science experiments of youth and nuclear technology of the future.

The Athlete: *Small Playground of a Primary School*

Sports is the focus of the three-part *Small Playground of a Primary School*, which aired on North Korean state television in May 2014.²⁴ Sports, along with youth, is a key area of focus for the Kim Jong-un regime as it works to cement the leader's support base. In addition to luring them in with high-tech gadgets, the regime is seeking to capture their loyalty by appealing to young people's love of sports and games.

The lead of *Small Playground* is a professional soccer player, Son-hyang, star of the Wolmido professional league and a member of North Korea's internationally ranked women's U-19 national team. However, the drama is not about her glories on the soccer pitch but about her life after a career-ending injury as she returns to her small hometown as a coach.

Son-hyang serves as an archetype for the modern young North Korean in the Kim Jong-un era. Accomplished, ambitious and clever, she arrives with bold new ideas if not teaching experience. Her methods are unorthodox, sometimes rubbing the older, more established teachers the wrong way. She studiously watches soccer videos — on an Acer computer — and takes notes to incorporate into her coaching. She kicks off soccer practice by giving the students a mathematics exam, which perplexes the other teachers. She's unwilling to accept the status quo, and summons up the courage to defy expectations in order to carry out her larger mission. Son-hyang serves as a proxy for Kim Jong-un himself. Like Son-hyang, Kim Jong-un was young, ambitious and inexperienced when he arrived on the political scene. He faced off against the old guard — in his case, the military — and in doing so has to prove that his modern approach is best for the country. By creating a sympathetic and appealing character in Son-hyang, the propagandists are teaching young North Koreans to like those qualities in Kim as well.

Soccer is a savvy policy objective for North Korea: it costs very little, apart from a net full of soccer balls, and yet can feed a whole generation of dreams. The regime has long portrayed sports as an avenue for North Koreans to make their country

proud on the international stage. Accolades abroad translate into prizes and perks at home, including trips to the capital and a fancy apartment. Scenes of Pyongyang's skate park and rollercoaster are shown in *Small Playground* as advertisement of the "rewards" for North Korean athletes who succeed in bringing glory to the party. Sports also remain one of the few ways for North Koreans to see the world, given sanctions and North Korea's diplomatic isolation due to its nuclear provocations.²⁵ The show seeks to illustrate that soccer stars can be made even in a small rural village with nothing but a dirt field. (Though, in reality, the stars of the film were plucked from North Korea's premier athletic academies.)²⁶

Also significant are the everyday interactions that unfold inside the school, at the parents' workplaces (a beauty salon, a science lab), at the country cottages where they live, and the social lessons relayed in scenes depicting marital spats, naughty children, tensions among co-workers, and budding romance.

In one scene, the young soccer player Yong-nam returns home to the sounds of cicadas, chickens squawking and dogs barking. His mother is inside chopping vegetables. Laundry hangs on a line outside the house. He can't help but see those clean white sheets as a perfect net. Yong-nam takes a step back and goes for the goal — and breaks a kimchi jar. Holding a piece of broken pottery, his irate mother calls out after Yong-nam as he scurries out the front gate. She picks up his soccer ball, slaps it and warns: "Just dare to come back!" In another scene, Yong-nam's mother decides the boy must focus on his studies instead of sports, and tells the coach Yong-nam won't be playing soccer anymore. Yong-nam pulls away in frustration. It turns out the generation gap, with children chafing against parental restrictions, applies to North Koreans, too. More importantly, however, it is the regime's way of addressing youthful rebelliousness against rule and order. *Small Playground* also includes a self-criticism session, with each boy taking his turn confessing his mistakes. The scene provides valuable insight into how self-criticism sessions are woven into daily life, and are used as opportunities for public contrition and self-improvement—if not punishment, which is not portrayed in the drama.

The Sailor: *Value Others*

Value Others, a 50-minute drama that aired on state television in 2016,²⁷ is the most moralistic of the North Korean dramas analyzed for this paper. It's also the only one to feature a military figure — a naval officer — as the main protagonist.



However, unlike the films made under Kim Jong-il, the plot of *Value Others* does not focus on Tong-u's military career and ambitions but on the lessons he learns as he makes his way in the world after graduating from the naval academy. More often than not in this short drama, we see Tong-u in civilian clothes rather than in military uniform. These changes in protagonist and plot in North Korean dramas reflect the shift from the *songun*, or military first, policy imposed by Kim Jong-il to the "party first" policy championed by Kim Jong-un. The subtle but significant changes would not have gone unnoticed among North Korean viewers, who have relished the chance to change out of the drab, monotone of military uniforms to brighter, fashionable clothing,²⁸ like the outfits they saw on the screen during the Kim Il-sung era. Giving actors the chance to show off the latest fashion also promotes a Kim Jong-un policy priority: expanding the homegrown production of consumer goods, including shoes, accessories and clothing.

The plot is simple: A mission to return a flashlight lent to Tong-u one rainy night by a generous sailor takes him on a journey to Pyongyang and across the North Korean countryside. Along the way, he crosses paths with strangers who repeatedly come to his aid; the acts of kindness surprise and inspire him, and are meant to serve as a guide for North Koreans on manners and social mores. Parenthood is a prominent theme, including a lesson on how to make a mother proud and the importance of honoring a father's sacrifices. As in *Small Playground* and *Young Researchers*, the boys are naughty. One grandfather takes pride in declaring that he's "raised nine of those mischievous boys," reflecting the state-backed campaign to encourage North Koreans to have bigger families. In a pivotal scene, one character recalls running away from home without food or money when he was a boy. He recounts the kindness of a bus attendant who cared for him, feeding him soda and crackers, as she convinced him to return home to his worried parents.

The propaganda goal of this drama is clear: to reinforce a sense of community, unity, and interconnectedness. By emphasizing loyalty to one's friends and family members, a reversal from Kim Jong-il-era themes ordering North Koreans to put the state before family, the regime is seeking to restore the traditional importance of the family and to encourage the strengthening of those bonds.

Why the emphasis on restoring family ties? The reference to running away — a recurring theme in the dramas analyzed for this paper — bears investigation as a possible allusion to the issue of defection. From 1953-97, fewer than 1,000 North Koreans are

recorded by the South Korean government as having defected to the South. During Kim Jong-il's rule, which formally began in 1997, that number jumped to more than 1,000 per year starting in 1998, peaking in 2009 with more than 2,900 defections to South Korea that year.²⁹ North Korean defections to South Korea, now surpassing 31,000, are believed to have angered Kim Jong-un, prompting a security crackdown in border areas to stem the flow of defections.³⁰ On TV, however, the dramas do not threaten punishment for those who run off; instead, they underline the toll on family members left behind.³¹ Emphasizing filial piety may be one strategy for preventing the flow of defections.

Tong-u's visit to Pyongyang, his first to the capital, is a digressive plot line that serves as a chance to show off life in "socialist fairyland"³² and the regime's latest projects. He stops two stylish women on the street to ask for directions. One suggests taking the *jiha* — literally, "the Underground" — a term Tong-u admits he's never heard before. "I'm talking about the subway," she says, saucily, the picture of sophistication. We see locals tapping into the subway using metro cards as digital announcements scroll on a screen behind them. Tong-u hops into a new subway car with red velvet seats that looks just like the ones in Seoul, apart from the lack of advertisements. Cellphones, laptop computers, widescreen TVs all make appearances as elements of daily life in Pyongyang. Tong-u's parents' Pyongyang apartment has a stovetop range, running water, a telephone and a cuckoo clock, all advertisement for the "good life" for the politically connected in Pyongyang.

Conclusion

Movies and TV continue to hold considerable sway in North Korea, where the majority of people have limited access to outside sources of entertainment and information such as the Internet.³³ For those lucky enough to have a TV set, and just enough electricity or access to a generator, the television continues to play a central role in the evening's entertainment.

TV programming also serves as an important conveyor of party policy. North Koreans, knowing scripts are vetted by the state, take their cues on what to say and how to behave from what they see on television. The shift on messaging under Kim Jong-un is reflected in the TV dramas made during his rule. State-run studios are making fewer military-themed movies and dramas than during his father's time, and are focusing on youth, daily life, and family-oriented plots. The propaganda is less overt than it was in the Kim Jong-il era, though the policies the party wishes to promote inform every scene and story.



The TV dramas provide an idealized view of life, and don't show the poverty, chronic food shortage, and malnutrition that plague much of the country outside the capital. However, they do attempt to subtly address some of the societal fissures in North Korean society today, including frustrations with the lack of power and running water, youthful rebelliousness, marital tensions, and defection. Each drama contains moral lessons on how to deal with such quandaries, and guides for how to behave in Kim Jong-un's North Korea today.³⁴ From the feisty former soccer star to the mischievous middle schooler with a habit of wearing his cap backwards, the protagonists of North Korean TV are hardly the brainwashed robots portrayed by Western media. They are funny, defiant, and complex. Nearly every drama features a child who feels misunderstood and runs away; it takes an understanding adult to bring them back into the fold. Teenagers are rebellious and mischievous. Adults are questioning and conflicted. The state's directors use humor and slapstick to add levity to these serious concerns and complaints.

These TV dramas shown nightly on Korean Central Television, and later sold as DVDs, are produced for domestic, not foreign, consumption. But for foreigners, they provide a valuable window into life inside a country that is largely closed off from the rest of the world. North Korea's video cameras take us into bedrooms, kitchens, offices, bars, and living rooms: the private places that foreigners, even those who live in Pyongyang, are not allowed. And while the scenes portrayed on screen are idealized, as in most soap operas the world over, they offer fascinating and illuminative glimpses into real and imagined spaces inside North Korea today as we overhear conversations, fights, and even the romantic sweet nothings between North Koreans. We see how relationships between friends, father and daughter, and among siblings and co-workers unfold and develop. Dramas provide an opportunity to observe how North Koreans interact, at least as portrayed on the screen, to see what social issues cause friction inside homes and workplaces, and to see how the regime and party "tell" viewers how, as good North Koreans, to resolve these problems. Just as policies and priorities have shifted with the political transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un, so too has the messaging in films and TV dramas, making it a valuable avenue for information to the outside world.

Endnotes

- ¹ Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee, *Our Escape Has Not Ended Yet* (Seoul: Wolgan Joseonsa, 2001).
- ² For background on the history of modern filmmaking in North Korea, read Johannes Schönherr's *North Korean Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012). Paul Fisher goes into detail about Shin and Choi, and their time in North Korea, in *A Kim Jong-il Production: The Extraordinary True Story of a Kidnapped Filmmaker, His Star Actress, and a Young Dictator's Rise to Power* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2015). Their story also is covered in the 2016 documentary *The Lovers and the Despot*, directed by Robert Cannan.
- ³ *Korean Art and Literature Yearbook, Juche 100 (2011)*, 조선문학예술년감 (Pyongyang: Korea Literature and Art Publishing House, 2012).
- ⁴ *Korean Art and Literature Yearbook, Juche 102 (2013)*, 조선문학예술년감, 주체 102 (2013) (Pyongyang: Korea Literature and Art Publishing House, 2014).
- ⁵ Starting in 2012, the annual arts yearbook and state media began referring to the main TV production studio by the updated name TV Drama Studio (TV극창작사), possibly emphasizing technical creativity over scriptwriting.
- ⁶ *Korean Art and Literature Yearbook, Juche 102 (2013)*, 조선문학예술년감, 주체 102 (2013) (Pyongyang: Korea Literature and Art Publishing House, 2014).
- ⁷ Jean H. Lee, "Film festival opens in movie-crazy North Korea," Associated Press, September 2012. From author's interview with Choe Hung Ryol, director of external affairs at Korea Film Studios. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/film-festival-opens-movie-crazy-north-korea-104216659.html>
- ⁸ From Kim Jong-il's official biography (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2005).
- ⁹ From Kim Jong-il speech, *Rodong Sinmun*, Sept. 1, 1987, p 4.
- ¹⁰ *Korean Film Yearbook 1988*, 조선영화년감 1988 (Pyongyang: Munye Publishing House, 1988.) The last *Korean Film Yearbook* appears to have been published in 1995 in the months after the death of Kim Il-sung. Since then, film and TV have been incorporated into the annual *Korean Art and Literature Yearbook*.
- ¹¹ Kim Jong-un, "Report to the Seventh Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea on the Work of the Central Committee," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 8, 2016, p. 5.
- ¹² *Inheritance* (유산) was released in 2005, *The Lieutenant of Those Days* (그날의 중위) in 2008, and *A Day of Training* (훈련의 하루) in 2010, according to state media.
- ¹³ Johannes Schönherr, *North Korean Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), 194.
- ¹⁴ *Our Neighbors* (우리 이웃들) aired on state TV in March 2013.
- ¹⁵ The 2000 version of *Our Neighbors* is available on videotape at the Information Center on North Korea in Seoul, South Korea, which is maintained by the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Unification.
- ¹⁶ Jean H. Lee, "North Korea rebuilds Pyongyang to welcome new leader," Associated Press, March 31, 2012.
- ¹⁷ "New plant provides half of NKorean capital's power," Associated Press, June 14, 2012.
- ¹⁸ Jean H. Lee, "NKorea rocket launch shows young leader as gambler," Associated Press, Dec. 14, 2012.
- ¹⁹ *Young Researchers* (소년 탐구자들), aired on Korean Central Television on April 16, 2013. The movie title is sometimes referred to in English as *Smart Children or Class Continues*.
- ²⁰ Jean H. Lee, "Shades of North Korea's founder in its young new leader," Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2012, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-shades-of-nkoreas-founder-in-its-young-new-leader-2012jan06-story.html>.
- ²¹ Jean H. Lee, "North Korea raises schooling period to 12 years from 11," Associated Press, Sept. 25, 2012.
- ²² Location is noted in closing credits of show.
- ²³ Skirt and jacket.
- ²⁴ *Small Playground of a Primary School* (소학교의 작은 운동장), aired over three evenings, May 1-3, 2014.
- ²⁵ See Arms Control Association's list of UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/UN-Security-Council-Resolutions-on-North-Korea>
- ²⁶ Actors' affiliations are noted in opening credits.
- ²⁷ *Value Others* (귀중히 여기라) first aired on Korean Central Television on Oct. 10, 2016, and was shown again on April 4, 2017.
- ²⁸ Based on author's own observations in Pyongyang from 2012-2017.
- ²⁹ Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea. Data accessed in November 2017. http://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/publications_data/statistics/defectors/
- ³⁰ Ju-min Park and James Pearson, "Bugged phones and double barbed wire: far fewer North Koreans defect," Reuters, May 2015.
- ³¹ For example, on June 21, 2016, the pro-North Korean website *Uriminzokkiri* published a letter written by the mother of a North Korean waitress, Ri Bom, who is among 12 North Korean waitresses who defected to South Korea while working at a restaurant in Ningbo, China. <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?ptype=ugisa1&no=112791>
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- ³³ See the report by Nathaniel Kretchun, Catherine Lee and Seamus Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information dynamics between the state and society in a digitizing North Korea," *Intermedia*, February 2017, http://www.intermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Compromising-Connectivity-Final-Report_Soft-Copy.pdf
- ³⁴ For a look at how social fissures were handled in an early Kim Jong-il era films, read Schönherr's analysis of the 1997 film *Myself in the Distant Future* (먼 후날의 나의 모습) in *North Korean Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), 129-32.



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1800 K St. NW, Suite 1010 | Washington, DC 20006
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