

JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

Towards Sustainable  
Economic & Security  
Relations in East Asia:

# U.S. AND ROK POLICY OPTIONS



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## **“GUESTS” OF THE DEAR LEADER: SHIN SANG-OK, CHOI EUN-HEE, AND NORTH KOREA’S CULTURAL CRISIS**

Kim Suk-young \*

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***“Kim [Jong-il] would be a perfect candidate to replace the deceased film critic Gene Siskel and join Roger Ebert as his co-host.”***

—“Making Offers Dictators Cannot Refuse”  
*Atlantic Monthly*, December 2002

## I. Introduction

On 19 October 1983 in Kim Jong-il’s office at the Central Party Building in Pyongyang, a private conversation took place between Kim and two South Korean filmmakers: director Shin Sang-ok and his actress wife Choi Eun-hee, who had spent five years in North Korea after they had been abducted and brought there under Kim Jong-il’s personal direction in 1978. That day, Shin and Choi secretly recorded what they describe as “Kim Jong-il’s tirade-like monologue rather than a dialogue between Kim and us,” which lasted for more than two hours.<sup>1</sup> According to the transcript of this recording (Shin and Choi 2001, 249), Kim Jong-il was struggling with the questions of how to elevate North Korean film to an advanced level without jeopardizing the tight control of its people:

We send our people to East Germany to study editing, to Czechoslovakia to study Camera technology, and to the Soviet Union to learn directing. Other than that, we cannot send our people to go anywhere since they are enemy states. No France, no West Germany, no Great Britain. We especially have to have conduct exchange with Japan, but we cannot even allow [North Korean people] to watch Japanese films. We end up analyzing foreign films to imitate them but there is limit to what we can do, but our efforts have brought no progress. I have been struggling with this problem for 5 years [since 1978]. All we ended up doing was to send a couple of people to the Soviet Union after the liberation and to establish a Film Institute, but they are not that impressive after all. I acknowledge that we lag behind in filmmaking techniques. We have to know that we are lagging behind and make efforts to raise new generation of filmmakers.

Although very little is known about North Korean cinema in the outside world, many have heard of the “beloved leader” Kim Jong-il’s intimate relationship with film. As this speech testifies, he played a wide range of roles concerning North Korean cinema—from producer, editor, and script writer to critic, historian, and visionary.

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1. Choi hid a small recorder in her handbag and successfully taped the conversation she and her husband had with Kim. Choi wrote in her memoir that she had decided to take the risk of tape recording the conversation because she wanted to prove that Kim Jong-il had kidnapped her and her husband and that they had been detained in North Korea against their will. The excerpted transcript of this recording is published in Shin and Choi (2001).

According to director Shin, Kim Jong-il is not only a dedicated film producer, but he is also a highly talented critic of drama and music, allegedly capable of pinpointing a single out-of-tune instrument from a full orchestra (Shin and Choi 2001, 288). Further accounts by Shin point out that Kim's boundless knowledge in arts owes to a large amount of materials collected from around the world, materials he has been systematically compiling over a long period of time. Shin had a chance to see Kim Jong-il's enormous private collection of films, which he thought was possibly the largest of its kind in the world:

On March 14th, 1983, Eun-hee [Shin's wife] and I were invited to a tour of Film Archive. I hurriedly got prepared because this was a place I always wanted to visit. The Film Archive stood on the hills in the middle of Pyongyang. Tightly locked heavy metal doors were guarding the Archive and no people were to be seen around. This was a controlled access area . . . We were invited inside for a briefing and were told that 15,000 copies of films were stored here. Nearly 250 employees including voice actors, translators, subtitle specialists, projectionists, and recording specialists, were working for this facility. The films at the Archive came from all around the world—from both communist and capitalists, developed and underdeveloped countries alike. The size of the three story building measured up to that of any main school buildings in South Korea. As I was listening to the briefing of an Archive employee, I thought that this could possibly be the largest [private] collection in the entire world. After the briefing the manager took us around for a tour. The width of the building was about 100 meters, and all three stories stretching 100 meters were filled with films. The room with the best equipment was the one holding North Korean films. In that room every single North Korean film ever made was stored according to chronological order. The room boasted of a perfect temperature and humidity control system. (Shin and Choi 2001, 274–75)

Shin goes on to describe that after this impressive introduction, he was given permission to visit the Film Archive and watch all kinds of movies as much as he wished. Access to this building was limited only to those who were recommended by Kim Jong-il himself, and for this reason there was an archive employee whose only responsibility was to take care of communications with Kim Jong-il's office, which testifies to the fact that the archive was indeed a private one. Choi and Shin also noticed that all of Kim Jong-il's residences across North Korea have projection rooms where Kim is known to watch films almost every night (Shin and Choi 2001, 289). Kim Jong-il was a highly motivated autodidact of world films, which, according to Shin, made Kim Jong-il's cinematic knowledge and talent surpass those of other North Korean filmmakers. Most filmmakers were barred from using this library owing to North

Korea's stringent ideological control, and consequently it was difficult for any filmmaker's understanding of world cinema to measure up to Kim Jong-il's knowledge. Kim Jong-il's predilection for film became a well known story through the accounts of the few people who had a rare chance to work closely with him. Director Shin was one of those inadvertently "chosen" ones who had a rare glimpse of Kim Jong-il's involvement in North Korean films while assisting him to realize his grand cinematic vision. In the mainstream media, this bizarre story of the abduction of the South Korean couple has often served as a popular entry point for exploring the psychotic nature of the "Dear Leader." Nonetheless, the fact that the North Korean leader chose South Korean filmmakers, citizens of the sworn enemy state, to bail the local film industry he had fostered out of the cultural dead end it found itself in provides us with the opportunity to delve deeper into more complex issues surrounding North Korean society and culture, such as the regime's attempts to strike a balance between outside culture and indigenous culture and the ways in which the North Korean leadership envisioned culture as an effective tool for shaping the minds of its people. Although Shin and Choi's book offers an in-depth analysis of the films produced by the kidnapped South Korean couple, we will look at the presence of this film couple as a way of exploring a complex matrix into which North Korean society's contradictions and ironies are woven. The filmmakers' book provides an opportunity to think about North Korea's culture as a highly politicized form of power.

## II. FILM AND CULTURE AS A POLITICAL TOOL

The kidnapping was a drastic measure that the frustrated visionary came up with after he assumed full power as heir designate. Kim Jong-il's conversation with Shin and Choi took place in 1983, but Kim had been struggling with the inherent North Korean contradictions since he entered politics in the late 1970s, and he saw the power of film and art in general as the primary source of, or his way to, governance.

The film industry is a collaborative field operated by multiple constituencies because it is a medium produced, circulated, and consumed on a massive scale, which makes it impossible to imagine that one person's initiative and taste can shape the contours of film production for an entire nation. But as the aforementioned episodes illustrate, Kim Jong-il's opinion has a formative influence on every aspect of cultural production in North Korea, which makes it very difficult to imagine North Korean film production without Kim's personal intervention.<sup>2</sup>

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2. It is no wonder that the world media has consistently satirized the Dear Leader's penchant for film and art, most notably via a mainstream Hollywood movie *Team America* in 2004 and the MADtv (on FOX) Kim Jong-il series.

What is often overlooked in the world's fascination about Kim Jong-il's cinemania, however, is that the function of film as an essentially political tool was already established long before Kim Jong-il's coming to power, and it is precisely by means of mobilizing film's political potential that Kim Jong-il ascended to become the successor of his father, strengthening his position as he further intensified the importance of film. Beginning at the establishment of North Korea in 1948, Kim Jong-il's father, Kim Il-sung, openly recognized film's potential to serve his political direction more effectively than any other means of communication. Although at the time of the founding of North Korea, "Kim Il-sung's comrades from the anti-Japanese guerilla struggle in Manchuria was comprised of the least educated of the Communist 'factions' and the least involved in cultural affairs" (Armstrong 2003, 171). Kim Il-sung nevertheless followed the examples of other socialist states and recognized the edifying potential of film for his newly founded republic.

Kim Il-sung learned a valuable lesson from Lenin and Mao, who held in high regard film's potential to serve as effective propaganda. Lenin himself presaged film's ability to penetrate the illiterate masses and concluded: "For us the most important of all arts is cinema" (Kenez 2001, 27). For the same reasons, the film industry in China was fully utilized by Nationalists and Communists alike in order to educate and mobilize the masses. Historian Charles Armstrong (2002, 2) enumerated the reasons why the Soviet leaders adhered to film as a major tool to serve politics, which functions as a useful reference to examine the North Korean case:

The Bolsheviks were attracted to the propaganda potential of film for several reasons. In a vast, diverse, predominantly agricultural and largely illiterate society such as the Soviet Union, cinema could reach far more people than, for example, literature. Furthermore, the novelty of film and the immediate power of its imagery made film, or so the Soviet leadership believed, particularly effective. Film-viewing itself was a public, collective act and therefore even the mode of viewing could be a means of instilling collective consciousness. Finally, the great expenses of making films allowed the state to control cinematic production more easily than other arts.

The aforementioned reasons why the Soviets privileged film for propaganda over other media—ease of controlling the filmmaking process, film's ability to reach out to a wider population, the novelty of the cinematic medium to attract attention from a wide range of population, and film consumption as a collective process furthering a collective consciousness—apply to the North Korean situation well.

The film production process requires massive participation and consumption. The collective nature of producing film simulates well the way North Koreans lead their

lives in various collective organizations.<sup>3</sup> The filmmaking process of shooting, editing, and watching others' lives mirrors how the North Koreans constantly monitor one another in their daily lives. Put otherwise, to watch, to be watched, to make a presentable showcase through editing all represent major principles of the North Korean way of life. This point reinforces Woo-young Lee's observation (2004, 42) of why "underground literature is difficult to detect, but underground cinema is difficult to make," since the production process is not only collective but also highly controlled to the degree that it does not allow for any improvisations or accidents to take place. From the planning stage to the final cut, filmmakers repeat the production process to achieve the image they desire, which resonates with the way North Koreans filter their language and behavior to abide by the rules. The rehearsal process of these productions could be viewed not only as means to reach a goal of producing an end product, but an end in itself. Put otherwise, the didactic nature of the production process becomes one of the most significant purposes of producing films.

On a more empirical level, the reason why film gained a prominent place in North Korea is because it allowed for easy and fast circulation around the country. Theater productions, in contrast, had to send people, props, and costumes to provinces, which could be a costly and slow process, whereas film reels could easily reach far ends of the North Korean territory. For these reasons, the North Korean state makes hundreds of copies of each new North Korean production to be sent nationwide. However, the distribution of film reels reflects the inherent hierarchy of various sectors within the country as the government sends color copies to large cities and black and white ones to rural areas. It is not at all surprising to see that films about the leaders are developed in the highest quality, using only U.S. Kodak or Japanese Fuji films and the highest quality chemicals (Shin and Choi 2001, 279).

Although rural areas are given secondary treatment in terms of film distribution, to a rural peasant with no previous exposure to film whatsoever the central government's efforts to reach out with unfamiliar yet marvelous moving images must have been a welcome event. Thus, no matter how dogmatic or one-dimensional the content of film might have been, the novelty of film as a new medium must have attracted the attention of the vast majority of the North Korean population.

In the absence of other competing media, film soon became the newborn state's most prestigious art form, so as to deserve the highest regard from its leader. In the 1960s Kim Il-sung (1981, 129) wrote:

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3. The most clear example would be *inminban*, the smallest social unit in North Korea, which consists of five households. Each *inminban* shares the duty of monitoring its members and providing the necessary labor force for communal projects, such as recruiting participants for street parades during state celebrations.



Film is the best form of propaganda for the party. It can be shown to multitude of people in multiple places. Film is capable of projecting a long period of history in a just couple of hours. It is a better form than novels or newspapers in educating workers. Film is also superior to theatre in a sense that it is not confined by the boundaries of stage.

Kim Il-sung's commitment to film encompassed a broad spectrum of plans to nourish the North Korean film industry in a tangible way. It promised filmmakers training, educational opportunities, and better wages, which served as the reason why many artists from South Korea defected to the North in the aftermath of division in 1945 (Armstrong 2002, 13–14).

The Soviet occupiers of the North provided an ideal atmosphere for filmmaking, but the situation changed soon after. Although Kim Il-sung initially assumed the role of apprentice in relation to the Soviet and the Chinese leaders' tutelage, under Kim's encouragement, North Korea began to devise highly nationalistic films distinctively changed from their Soviet or Chinese counterparts. His son Kim Jong-il inherited the state's vision of film's irreplaceable importance in grooming a distinctively nationalistic sentiment. The nationalistic tendency and ethnocentric impulse of North Korean film and performance became a highly effective means of delineating the boundary between "us" and "them," comrades and enemies, and it functioned as a managing principle of the North Korean society.

### **III. GROWING CULTURAL ISOLATION OF NORTH KOREA**

The rise of Kim Jong-il as the producer of numerous productions and arbiter of creative principles merges with a decrease in the coverage of information about world culture and arts within North Korea. Although early North Korean art was in fierce pursuit of dogmatic revolutionary ideology, the North Korean publications beginning in the late 1940s covered a fair amount of international arts news and kept the dynamic flow of information. However, the relatively free flow of information gradually started to diminish with the launch of the personal cult of Kim Il-sung in the 1960s. This tendency continues into the 1970s, when Kim Jong-il gradually rose to become a prominent figure in arts and politics. Sacrificing the relatively free flow of information was a necessary step in solidifying the monolithic leadership of the Kim family.

The importance of this rather obvious fact of isolation is contrasted with the fact that the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, never severed himself from the dynamic development of world cinema, although average North Koreans were shown only dogmatic productions, mostly domestic, with only occasional exposure to films from the socialist bloc.

When reading arts-related publications coming out of North Korea from the late 1950s to recent times, one is struck by how the coverage of world culture has dwindled visibly over time. In the 1950s, North Korean publications covered an impressive array of world theater, dance, and film. The opening issue of *Joseon Yesul* [North Korean Art], arguably the most important journal covering North Korean arts, was first published in September 1956, and it featured columns exclusively dedicated to the coverage of the world stage, from both the Communist and the Western spheres. Among the works introduced were: Soviet-American collaborative film projects, the opening of the children's theater in Beijing, Italian actress Anna Magnani's 1955 Oscar for best actress, the opening of Nekrasov in London's Unity Theatre, and the development of Polish film theaters in the 1950s (*Joseon Yesul* 1956, 106–7). However, in just a year, this colorful array of worldly coverage soon narrowed down to the cultural activities of socialist states, such as the success of the Soviet and PRC troupes in Indonesia, Egypt, and Iran (*Joseon Yesul* 1957, 128). The March 1957 issue of *Joseon Yesul*, the seventh volume, was the last one to run a world theater column.

Information about the international coverage of films that came from both communist and capitalist regimes lasted much longer than other cultural topics. In the early 1960s, for example, Lee So-hun (1964) wrote an article introducing a brief history of Italian films, and Kim Jeong-ho (1966) wrote a series of articles that provided an overview of the 1920s French avant-garde films and filmmakers, such as Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and Germaine Dulac's *Arabesque*. The magazine covered a fairly decent number of international film festivals, such as the Venice International Film Festival, the Asian-African Film Festival (*Joseon Yeonghwa* 1966, 40), and the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (*Joseon Yeonghwa* 1966, 24). By the end of 1966, however, *Joseon Yeonghwa*'s rich coverage of world films gradually narrowed down in scope to cover Marxist-Leninist techniques and ideology in filmmaking (Gang 1967).

As if resisting the Soviet Union's de-Stalinization campaign and the attack on personality cults the campaign represented, the North Korean media started in 1957 to promote Kim Il-sung's unchallenged position. Beginning in the 1960s, it became obvious that the cult of Kim Il-sung began to intensify in all realms of the arts. The inner covers of the magazine, which used to feature various still shots of films and actors, started to publish Kim Il-sung's photos and instructions continuously. The October 1960 issue of *Joseon Yesul* even published a photo of Kim Il-sung with his retinue on the cover page, an image that seemed to have absolutely no relation to the arts world whatsoever . . . or did it?

In my view, this cover of *Joseon Yesul* featuring the face of the cultural czar symbolically gestures the displacement of international art and culture for an indigenous political model, a shift that North Korea would live with for many years to come. The

shift in cultural production from international to local, multicultural to dogmatic, was a well choreographed move on the North Korean leadership's side. As obvious as Kim Jong-il's fascination with film was, it is only fair to state that Kim Jong-il's open manifestation of cinemania is due not only to his personal proclivity but also to a natural result of searching for the most efficient way to gain political capital within the leadership and manage the North Korean people's worldview.

#### **IV. KIM JONG-IL'S CULTURAL ROLE**

According to director Shin, the reason Kim Jong-il was chosen as heir apparent to his father Kim Il-sung was twofold: having witnessed the de-Stalinization campaign in the Soviet Union and the degradation of Mao Zedong in the PRC, Kim Il-sung was concerned with the possibilities of suffering the same posthumous insult. Taking these factors into account, director Shin argues that Kim Jong-il earned his privilege to be the heir designate by effectively building the cult of his father by means of the performing and visual arts (Shin and Choi 2001, 289). Shin's view is both persuasive and illuminating for understanding Kim Jong-il's rise to power as ultimately related to his successful cultural productions glorifying Kim Il-sung. Many scholars assume that Kim Jong-il was officially designated as the heir to Kim Il-sung in the late 1970s, which, indeed, follows Kim Jong-il's intensive yet highly successful deification of his father as the legitimate ruler of Korea and the canonization of his household through revolutionary operas and films in the early 1970s. Film, in this sense, is not only an object of Kim Jong-il's personal interest but also a highly effective apparatus to increase incrementally Kim's political capital.

But Kim Jong-il's cinematic journey does not stop here. He took one additional step in appropriating film as an instrument for domestic politics: he attempted to bring in innovative techniques to the filmmaking industry and made visible efforts to diversify North Korean film. According to Shin, this seemed to have been motivated by Kim Jong-il's desire to increase the ability of North Korean films to gain visibility and notoriety in the international arena through festivals circuits and even commercial releases. Kim Jong-il set his ultimate cinematic goal to win the hearts and minds of the international audience. If Kim Il-sung endowed film with a mighty social status as an adequate tool to carry out propaganda, Kim Jong-il strove to achieve higher filmic standards in order to compete with world cinema.

Yet, Kim Jong-il's task of enhancing artistic quality of film while keeping in mind the notion of film as the most effective propaganda tool was paradoxical in nature, as it required Kim Jong-il to constantly mediate arts and politics without compromising either one. Kim Jong-il had two conflicting realizations about North Korean film: he believed it was the best political instrument he possessed as a ruler, but he also believed that North Korean film could benefit from diversification that would enhance its artistic

value. How could he elevate North Korean film to compete with world cinema without opening up the border of the country? How could he improve actors' performances and create competition without taking away the central government's subsidy, which was the only way to finance any film production?

These questions bring us back to the private conversation introduced in the beginning. Kim Jong-il's struggle to seamlessly mediate propaganda and arts in film is known to us thanks to the risk Shin and Choi took in recording their conversation with Kim Jong-il on 19 October 1983 in Kim Jong-il's office. Kim in this conversation honestly expressed his frustrations over North Korean films as underdeveloped as children in kindergarten whereas the South Korean film industry was approaching its full maturity like college students (Shin and Choi 2001, 254). Such an acknowledgement creates a stark contrast with his official speeches and writings, in which he extols the virtues of the North Korean cinema and socialist cinema as a whole *vis-à-vis* their corrupt capitalist counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Kim was well aware of the inertia of his film staff, which he believed was due to a lack of competition and their excessive reliance on the central government support: "Since the government is taking care of the pay and basic needs of writers, they are not motivated to produce more scenarios. When requested to do so, they want to be sent to sanatoriums or resorts to work on it" (Shin and Choi 2001, 261). When Shin told Kim Jong-il there was a need to change the typical propaganda style and produce heroic movies in the American Western style in order to make them more interesting and effectively didactic, Kim Jong-il was fully in accordance with Shin (Shin and Choi 2001, 233).

This encounter brought about a dramatic change in North Korean filmmaking in the 1980s, when the element of entertainment together with propagandistic value became one of the fulcrums of what sustains North Korean film. Director Shin's presence in the North Korean film industry from 1983 to 1986, during which time he directed 6 feature films in collaboration with his wife and supervised 13, is to account for such a turn in North Korean film. But moreover, it was Kim Jong-il's determination that opened the door for the change to take place. Kim openly acknowledged to Shin and Choi during their private conversation: "When director Shin asked me [the other day] why we do not host an international film festival, I was ashamed to admit then, but I admit now. We really do not have any films to present. What kind of North Korean film could we show to the entire world? We do not have any films that will make the

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4. For instance, in comparing the roles of film directors in opposing ideological systems, Kim Jong-il (1987, 2–3) wrote: "In capitalist society the director is shackled by the reactionary governmental policy of commercializing the cinema and by the capitalists' money, so that he is a mere worker who obeys the will of the film-making industrialists whether he likes it or not. On the other hand, in socialist society the director is an independent and creative artist who is responsible to the Party and the people for the cinema. Therefore, in the socialist system of film-making the director is not a mere worker who makes films but the commander, the chief who assumes full responsibility for everything ranging from the film itself to the political and ideological life of those who take part in film-making."

world laugh and cry” (Shin and Choi 2001, 251–52). Kim took *Star of Joseon* (1980–87), the sacrosanct epic film that deifies his family history traced back to his grandfather’s household, as an example of how propaganda and art have become mutually exclusive in North Korean filmmaking (Shin and Choi 2001, 255): “*Star of Joseon* is history. It is suitable for those who have difficult time reading history, but it is not art. It is history.”

Kim knew that there was a way to advance the film industry by learning from the world’s experience. The painful realization tempted Kim to absorb the advanced technology of Western filmmaking, but this desire presented a set of problems that had to be curbed by North Korea’s political line. The discrepancy that rose from limited political freedom and the desire to catch up with the rest of the world in filmic standards was the dilemma metonymically standing for the entire social problem Kim was facing in the 1980s when North Korea’s neighbor and ally China was living North Korea’s hypothetical situation as reality. In a private conversation with the South Korean film couple (Shin and Choi 2001, 256–57), Kim bluntly admitted:

When I met with Hu Yaobang of the PRC, he honestly told me that China partially opened up its doors to learn advanced technology, but young people started imitating only western appearance, growing beards and long hair. It’s the same with us. If we start airing foreign films on TV and everywhere, then only nihilistic thoughts will emerge out of them. Our country is now divided and we must foster national dignity and pride. We cannot simply worship foreign things so we must raise the level of our technology and then open our country to foreign things, but this is paradoxical in itself. So I want to give [film industry] partial autonomy within the given limits.

This primary contradiction Kim faced—to renovate the ailing North Korean film industry without the danger of opening North Korea to the outside world—thus led to a twisted solution in the abduction plot of a South Korean couple. And just as Kim had hoped, the couple did so well with their string of film productions that they even managed to claim some degree of fame on the international festival circuit, mostly featuring films from the socialist bloc, by winning the special jury prize for directing *Dolaoji Anneun Milsa* [Special envoy who never returned] at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 1984 and the best actress award for Choi’s performance in *Sogeu* [Salt] at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1985.

## V. THE ROLE OF SHIN AND CHOI IN THE NORTH-SOUTH DYNAMIC

Shin and Choi’s given task in North Korea was not limited to renovating the North Korean film industry and charting out a place for it on the map of world cinema. The

fact that they were the chosen guests of Kim Jong-il surreptitiously pointed to alternate possibilities for understanding North Korean cultural policies: If all Kim Jong-il wanted was to innovate North Korean cinema and achieve international claim, he could have made exceptions by sending a few North Korean directors to the Western world to bring back advanced filmmaking technology or by inviting directors from Japan or other Western countries to North Korea for a limited time. Instead, Kim Jong-il decided to choose South Koreans for reasons dictated not entirely by the aesthetics of filmmaking but by the ethnicities of the filmmakers. The fact that Shin and Choi were Koreans must have been a determining factor for Kim's decision precisely for the reason that Kim envisioned the couple functioning as a cultural buffer filtering and bringing in Western cinema through the disguised forms of Korean ethnicity.

Ethnic cohesion—especially because Shin was originally from North Korea—was a sublimated process of bringing in foreign influences under the well-known political banner of *uri mijok kkiri* [our people (deal) with each other (without foreign interference)]. This sentiment implied Kim's desire to improve (North) Korean film with the help of (South) Koreans without any foreign cultural intervention; this aptly served the ideological foundation of *juche*.

By having South Koreans make North Korean films embodying North Korean ideology, Kim Jong-il was keen on projecting South Koreans in general as North Korea's revolutionary project. As the North Korean leadership saw it, South Korean civilians were subjects placed under the wrong leadership and therefore should be liberated from the oppression of corrupt South Korean capitalists and foreign imperialists. In this light, Shin and Choi were officially projected as prodigal children who were temporarily led astray under a wrong set of political and cultural influences, but were finally rescued and brought back to where they originally belonged. They were supposed to showcase the North Korean belief that the only good South Korean was the one liberated by North Koreans.

But was this propaganda project really a transparent process where the directions of the Dear Leader were symmetrically transmitted to his guests as hostages? Were there no subversive moments in Shin's and Choi's careers in North Korea when they secretly bit the hands that brought them there and provided for them? The irony of their presence is doubled when we consider that the almighty cultural leader had to depend on his prisoners for promoting North Korean cinematic standards, which were to serve as the models for everyday life in North Korea. The inversion of power relations—in which Shin and Choi were the guiding light for Kim, the prisoners providing the jailer with visions of the rescue of North Korea—symptomatically signals the intricate dynamics of what North Korea officially put on display at the expense of suppressing other heretical factors into silence and invisibility.

Although covered in the veil of revolutionary ideology, there are fissures and gaps in the productions Shin and Choi produced, which allows for subversive readings challenging conventional ways of understanding their work as faithfully serving Kim's regime.<sup>5</sup> It is undeniable that the changes Shin and Choi brought to the North Korean film industry were often limited, but their story of North Korea opens up the possibilities of discussing most of the crucial moments in the development of North Korean theater, film, and performance history and offers tales of misplacement in time and space, the place of the state patriarch in North Korean society, gender relations, and the everyday performance they were to display as model citizens of Kim Jong-il.

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5. For instance, in 1984, Shin directed a film entitled *Runaway* featuring his wife, Choi. Based on the 1920 leftist novel by Choi Seo-hae, the film centers on a male protagonist who joins an underground anti-Japanese revolutionary group. The film features a scene in which he blows up a train with dynamite. To enhance the realistic effect, Shin asked the North Korean authorities to give permission to blow up a real functional train because there was no technology to create appropriate special effects to assist the scene. The authorities came back to Shin immediately with a positive answer. As Shin wrote in his memoir, "Everything was allowed to him in the name of filmmaking in North Korea, and this was possibly the most cathartic moment in his filmmaking career" (Shin and Choi 2001, 339–40). Shin's comment implies the possibilities of reading subversive pleasures of a South Korean captive director damaging the North Korean state property under the disguise of making revolutionary films. This film also introduces graphic allusion to sexual intercourse, which the official North Korean view labeled as a theme essentially tied to the corrupt culture of capitalism.

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