The Disaster of Abandoning Socialism: North Korean Discourse on *Perestroika* and Post-Soviet Reform

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Abstract

After the collapse of the global socialist camp, the USSR's *Perestroika* and abandonment of socialism became important to North Korean ideology as antipodes to the DPRK's 'Socialism of Our Style' (우리식 사회주의; *Uri sik sahoejuŭi*). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, North Korean official culture fostered a complex and coherent discourse on the subject in various domains, including literary fiction.

This article analyzes the key features of the discourse, as set out in DPRK leaders' speeches and as developed in journalism and literature in the 1990s

and 2000s. It also studies the discourse's relationship to the DPRK's domestic policy and its implications for future Russia-DPRK relations.

Keywords: North Korean culture, North Korean propaganda, North Korean literature, *Perestroika*.

THE OFFICIAL NARRATIVE ON *PERESTROIKA*

In 1991–1994, *Perestroika* emerged as the central motif of the speeches and discussions of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. (In North Korea's unique political landscape, leaders' speeches serve as authoritative narratives that can be taken as indicative of scholarly discourse nationwide.) Both leaders viewed the Soviet Union's collapse as a man-made catastrophe—an entirely avoidable event caused solely by the Soviet elite's shortsighted and treacherous actions in the course of *Perestroika*. (Called *Kaep'yŏn* (개편), meaning 'reorganization/restructuring', and always accompanied by quotation marks with a negative connotation.) But the father and son focused their criticism on different aspects of Gorbachev's sweeping reforms.

KIM IL SUNG'S RETROSPECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Kim Il Sung—then retired from active governing and mainly busy with writing memoirs and corresponding with friends and former colleagues—saw *Perestroika* through the lens of longstanding disagreements with the Soviet leadership.

Kim Il Sung was quite negatively disposed towards Mikhail Gorbachev, but did not blame him exclusively for the USSR's downfall, which he attributed to the protracted erosion of its foundational principles since the post-Stalin thaw.

Kim Il Sung saw Stalin's successors as ideologically deviant, personally degenerate, and self-interested, and the Soviet people as their confused and disoriented victims—who, without a worthy leader, were disheartened in the face of danger and failed to save their country. Yet he was sure that one day they would restore their Soviet motherland.

Throughout his later years, Kim Il Sung consistently reiterated these arguments in numerous writings and speeches, although not all

of them were explicitly dedicated to this topic. Clearly, the old leader felt a need to share his ideas with the world. In a conversation with the performers after a *Four Seasons* concert on 7 February 1993, Kim Il Sung discussed the fall of the USSR. He blamed Khrushchev for revisionism and ideological laxity, "after which the USSR's collapse became a matter of time." He argued that Khrushchev's actions had strengthened the influence of the U.S.'s hostile bourgeois ideology and culture, that "people remained interested only in money, cars, and dachas" (Kim Il Sung, 2011a, p. 23).

For Kim Il Sung, Gorbachev continued Khrushchev's destructive policies that disarmed the people with false principles of 'democratization,' 'openness,' and 'new thinking.' Gorbachev's abolishment of the CPSU's leading role dismantled the very foundation of the country.

Kim Il Sung even suggested that Gorbachev "had likely received a lot of money" for destroying the USSR and the global socialist system. Kim Il Sung believed that while Gorbachev did not formally renounce socialism, he ideologically degenerated (Ibid, pp. 24-25). Kim Il Sung also accused Gorbachev of betraying his ally in the GDR, Erich Honecker, "selling him out to the imperialists" (Kim Il Sung, 2011b, p. 376).

During this meeting, Kim Il Sung also expressed the belief that "the Russian people most likely already regret the destruction of their country; many wish to restore everything, but they have no leader" (Kim Il Sung, 2011a, p. 25). He recalled conversing with a visiting Russian singer, who had promised to attend the Friendship Festival and perform his favorite song, *Longing for the Homeland* (사향가 *sahyangga*). She assured him that none of the CPSU members among her colleagues had betrayed the Party, and all were keeping their membership cards (Kim Il Sung, 2011a, pp. 22-23).

During a meeting with the leader of the Belgian Workers' Party on 30 June 1994, Kim Il Sung deplored the USSR's collapse, saying: "the country lost everything in an instant" (Kim Il Sung, 2011c, p. 408). He contrasted the "traitors," Khrushchev and Gorbachev, with the exemplary and personally decent Stalin, a great leader whose resolve was pivotal in the war against Germany: "I still watch Soviet films

about Stalin and see how he behaved during the war. He did not leave Moscow, even when the Germans were just 40 kilometers away." "People really respected Stalin, going into battle 'For the Motherland, for Stalin!'" (Ibid, p. 409). Stalin's praiseworthy initiatives included his "fight against cosmopolitanism, i.e., globalism." Under Stalin, there was no greed: "If someone received a pen as a gift from a capitalist country, he would give it to the state."

Kim Il Sung claimed that Khrushchev used the fight against the personality cult to undermine Stalin's posthumous authority, betraying and "selling the USSR to imperialists" (Ibid, p. 409). The USSR's ideological decline began precisely under Khrushchev, when people lost their socialist and communist ideals and became preoccupied with material pursuits. This spiritual and ideological decay made them unable to recognize the reactionary nature of Gorbachev's 'new thinking' (Ibid, p. 409).

In a conversation with Chinese participants in the anti-Japanese liberation movement on 7 May 1994, Kim Il Sung emphasized the paramount importance of the communist parties in socialist states. He referenced the Chinese song "Without the Communist Party, There Will Be No New China" (Kim Il Sung, 2011d, p. 349) and expressed confidence that China would never abandon its Communist Party.

During this conversation, Kim Il Sung fondly recalled meeting Soviet hero Nikolai Lyashchenko, who had commanded the 10th Motorized Rifle Division of the 25th Army in Korea. They discussed how "the traitor Gorbachev" destroyed the 18-million-member CPSU by leaving it ideologically adrift. Kim noted that "Nikolai, like many former CPSU members, still keeps his membership card" (Ibid, p. 350).

During a meeting with foreign delegations on 16 April 1994, Kim Il Sung attributed the ruin of socialism in the USSR and East Europe to their communist parties' bureaucratic complacency, inability to hear the people, and loss of popular support (Kim Il Sung, 2011e, p. 281). He also criticized Eastern Europeans for overly aligning with Moscow: "When it rained in Moscow, people in Berlin would open an umbrella" (Ibid, p. 281). Whereas the DPRK acts independently.

KIM JONG IL: PRACTICAL LESSONS OF *PERESTROIKA*

As the de facto leader of the nation, Kim Jong Il called for drawing practical lessons from socialism's collapse in the USSR so as to avoid a similar catastrophe in the DPRK. In his article *Historical Lessons of Building Socialism and Our Party Line*, he acknowledged that the USSR's collapse had given rise to a narrative of capitalism's victory and socialism's defeat, one that many confused people accepted as true. "However, this is not so. We will learn these lessons and rebuild socialism," Kim Jong Il wrote (Kim Jong Il, 2012a, p. 58).

Kim Jong Il held that one of the disaster's most important lessons is the importance of maintaining national independence and resisting *sadaejui* (사대주의), or "serving the great," subservience to powerful nations. Such independence underpins the DPRK's resilience, distinguishing it from the Eastern European countries that unconditionally followed the USSR's lead. "The USSR boasted of being a mighty power, yet now it has become a nonentity. The Eastern European nations, like blind following the blind, have also dissolved" (Kim Jong Il, 2012b, p. 420).

Kim Jong Il was confident that capitalism offers nothing truly attractive: despite its rhetoric of freedom and democracy, it fails to deliver genuine liberty. "The poor have only the freedom to seek a place to make money. People in the former USSR are now living through unemployment that never existed under socialism, and through declining living standards. They remember how things were under socialism, and so they protest against the government" (Ibid, p. 419). He also condemned the corruption in the USSR, noting that "traitors even stole the party's finances" (Ibid, p. 420).

Kim Jong Il blamed the USSR's collapse mainly on the over-bureaucratization of the CPSU's formulation and propagation of ideology and on its disconnection from the masses. He stressed the importance of combating officials' privileges, corruption, and arbitrary power, which undermine faith in the government. In his article *Strengthen Party Work, Strengthen Socialism of Our Style*, he wrote: "I have long said that developing the bureaucracy is like drinking poison" (Kim Jong Il, 2012d, p. 41).

Kim Jong Il underscored the importance of revitalizing party cadres: "When cadres degenerate under the influence of bad ideas, the

party itself degenerates, becoming incapable of defending the gains of the revolution. The fall of socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe offers a stark lesson in this regard" (Kim Jong Il, 2012e, p. 481).

In his article *On Strengthening Revolutionary Principles*, Kim Jong Il also attributed the socialist camp's downfall to the diminished role of the leader. The Soviets and Eastern Europeans did not understand the necessity of the people's loyalty to the leader, and "without the leader, there can be no independence; without the leader, it is impossible to fulfill historical tasks and safeguard the gains of the revolution," he emphasized (Kim Jong Il, 2012f, p. 61).

To avert similar tendencies in the DPRK, Kim Jong Il called for closer work with the intelligentsia. He believed that "in the USSR and Eastern Europe, it was precisely the intelligentsia that—having encountered temporary difficulties—turned away from the party and destroyed socialism" (Ibid, p. 65).

He stressed that revolutionaries must trust the leader unconditionally—"without personal interest or pretense"—and "love the leader sincerely, without cries of 'hooray'." As an example of insincere attitudes towards the leader, he pointed to Khrushchev, who praised Stalin while Stalin lived, and then dragged him posthumously through the dirt under the pretense of countering the cult of personality (Kim Jong Il, 2013, p. 72).

Kim Jong Il repeatedly affirmed that the DPRK would never follow the path of *Perestroika*. Even during the severe economic hardships of the late 1990s, known as the 'Arduous March', he firmly rejected any link between the country's difficulties and its socialist system. In a speech to the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea on 27 September 1997, he attributed the crisis to the "disappearance of the common socialist market after the collapse of the USSR and the European socialist countries, and the economic blockade imposed by [North Korea's] enemies" (Kim Jong Il, 2013a, p. 209).

Kim Jong Il also criticized party cadres for their inadequate response to the crisis, emphasizing that the DPRK must steadfastly uphold its socialist system. He warned cadres against being deceived by the imperialist and reactionary attempts to lead the country towards 'reform' and 'openness': "All this serves only to restore capitalism and

undo the achievements of Kim Il Sung and the Korean people's fifty years of effort…. Our principle is to live according to our system, defending our socialism without concession. I will not permit any 'reforms' or 'openness'—this is my unwavering decision" (Ibid, pp. 209, 210).

To bolster his arguments, Kim Jong Il quoted some senior Soviet official, who had visited the DPRK, saw the good and the bad, and warned that the Koreans "should under no circumstances abandon socialism, since once capitalism arrives, nothing will be left of the good" (Ibid, p. 213).

Kim Jong Il underscored the vital role of art in stabilizing the nation and reinforcing statehood. He regarded Juche art, especially "revolutionary operas," as politically impeccable, placing them above classical operas. He claimed: "although the USSR was always proud of the patriotic opera *Ivan Susanin*, it does not even compare to our patriotic revolutionary opera *Loyal Daughter of the Party*, created in the 1970s" (Kim Jong Il, 2012g, p. 116).

Notably, lamenting the DPRK's shortage of popular songs imbued with "ideological artistry" (사상예술성; *sasangyesulsŏng*), Kim Jong Il pointed to the USSR during WWII (Kim Jong Il, 2012g, p. 191) and recalled the exemplary work of Soviet radio broadcasters like Yuri Levitan (Ibid, p. 190). This illustrates North Korean leaders' profound connection to the Soviet experience and their perception of the Stalin era as a benchmark and a normative standard.

In discussing the role of art in building up the nation's morale, Kim Jong Il cited the song *Holy War*, written just three days after Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR (Kim Jong Il, 2013b, p. 84). Emphasizing the importance of promoting ideology, he recalls the character of Commissar Dmitry Furmanov in the film *Chapayev* (1934) (Kim Jong Il, 2013c, p. 308). And discussing the need to popularize the heroes of the Korean People's Army, he cites Andrei Zhdanov (a Soviet politician responsible for developing the Soviet cultural policy) as an ideal party activist who "was respected by everyone, although he had few awards" (Kim Jong Il, 2013d, p. 375). He compared North Korea's post-1991 blockade to that of Soviet Russia after the 1917 October Revolution (Kim Jong Il, 2012i, p. 269).

Thus, based on the USSR's history, Kim Jong Il saw a need to strengthen the DPRK's traditions, which were largely linked to those of the USSR under Stalin. He believed that North Korean society should become even more closed and militarized, with even stronger positions for its leader and the state. (Which actually means ***less*** 'bureaucratization', i.e., officials' passivity, arrogance, disconnection from the people, and prioritization of formality over ideology.)

This meant abandoning the tentative attempts to open the country that Kim Jong Il had undertaken in the second half of the 1980s. And, although Kim Jong Il emphasized North Korea's independence from great powers, he consistently turned to Stalin's USSR, its national heroes and myths, as a point of reference.

Notably, while criticizing *Perestroika*, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il maintained respect and empathy for the Soviet people, seen as the victims rather than perpetrators of the catastrophe. A similar ideological narrative was established with regard to South Korea. In the 2000s, North Korean art and media began to portray South Koreans not as accomplices in Korea's ongoing division, but as powerless victims of their reactionary government (Gabroussenko, 2011b). In both Russia and South Korea, this was blamed on a lack of worthy leaders, concordant with the masses' infantilization in North Korean propaganda and ideology (Myers, 2010).

The emergence of Vladimir Putin changed North Korea's rhetoric about Russia. In an interview to *TASS* on 24 July 2001, Kim Jong Il spoke of "friendly Korea-Russia relations" and noted that "his meeting with Putin in Moscow was a joyful event" and "meetings with the friendly people of Russia awaken happy memories" (Kim Jong Il, 2013e, p. 21). He evidently saw Putin's ascent as an opportunity to revive friendly and cooperative relations with Russia.

THE FORMATION OF THE *PERESTROIKA* DISCOURSE IN CULTURE

North Korean leaders' fundamental narrative of Soviet *Perestroika* was developed in detail in journalism and fiction.

In keeping with traditions of North Korean propaganda, the first response to the new political requirements was a song that briefly outlined the party's strategy.

In 1991, *Let Us Defend Socialism* (DPRK Music, 2021), a song with lyrics by Sin Unmo and music by Hwang Chinyŏng, was released. Performed by the Pochonbo pop ensemble with an upbeat melody, it was reminiscent of the popular song *Chollima Rushing* (1966)—the unofficial anthem of the Chollima mobilization era (Sam Il, 2024).

Let Us Defend Socialism urged listeners to "hold the red flag high" "despite dark clouds and winds of temptation." The refrain proclaimed that "our Party" and "our Socialism" were the finest in the world. The video clip reinforced this message by the images of socialism: bustling industrial facilities, free educational institutions, and maternity hospitals. Vulnerable social groups—children, the elderly, women, and young families—were depicted as living proof of socialism's protective embrace.

The song boldly asserted that "success in defending socialism will be our victory, while its loss would spell the death of the country." This dichotomy laid the groundwork for contrasting *Perestroika* with 'Socialism of Our Style.'

The red flag emerged here as a potent symbol. Until the 1990s, flag symbolism mainly featured in historical narratives of Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese resistance. However, beginning in the 1990s, the red flag became part of a new epic narrative extolling North Korea's Red Banner philosophy and unwavering loyalty to the *Red Banner of Revolution* (Kim Kich'ŏl, 1996). In Kim Myŏngik's poem *The Koreans* (2000), "traitor" Gorbachev, against the will of the people, replaces Lenin's red banner, over the Kremlin and the Russian Embassy in Pyongyang, with the "tricolor banner of tsarism." This tragic image starkly contrasts with the resilience of the Korean red banner, which continues to wave proudly over the DPRK.

Contrasting *Perestroika* with 'Socialism of Our Style' became central to the stories published in the journal *Ch'ŏngnyŏn munhak (Youth Literature)*. In the essay *The Great Leader's Orde*r, renowned writer Hong Sŏkjin laments that "the USSR, once the giant of socialism, destroyed decades of socialist accomplishments. The whirlpools of ethnic conflicts produced tens of thousands of beggars and homeless people. The country was plunged into the cruel reality of capitalism's sewers." The people of the USSR and Eastern Europe "shed bitter tears of remorse,

yearning for socialism in which they once found happiness." Meanwhile, North Koreans, under their own leader, continue to defend socialist ideals, remaining "a happy and proud people" (Hong, 1996, p. 25).

Cho Ch'angju's essay *Heirs!* (1996), draws a stark contrast between post-Soviet and North Korean youth. The former, with *Perestroika*, ceased to be the ideological heirs of their fathers. In the former socialist countries, "a girl joins the mafia for a handful of dollars and stabs her own father to death," "young people indulge in depravity in neon-lit brothels," "under the influence of drugs and alcohol, are photographed naked in dirty poses," and "are mired in gluttony, debauchery, luxury, and entertainment." Conversely, in the DPRK, young people "hold high the red banner of socialism," resisting the winds of liberalism and remaining faithful to the ideals of their fathers, preserving the legacy of socialism.

The essay *The Strength of Korea* (Chosŏnŭi him, 2000) notes how the USSR—despite the formidable army and advanced weaponry with which it defeated Hitler, and which far surpassed the DPRK's own military resources—collapsed without a single shot fired, because it had no leader. In contrast, the DPRK is led by Kim Jong Il, who unites his people and makes the world envy and admire North Korea's strength.

Notably, North Korean media frequently cite laudatory statements by former Soviet citizens as evidence of Kim Jong Il's greatness. In the anonymous article *Analysis of Great Words* (Myŏngŏnhaesŏl, 2000), Kim Jong Il is extolled by an unnamed Soviet military specialist, who describes the leader as "unique," "capable of capturing the entire Earth with a single glance," "unprecedented in history," and "resembling a mythical giant who lifts the Earth with one hand and spins it." The Russian specialist assures that "Kim Jong Il is infinitely brave, and although the world seems to be dominated by imperialism today, the Earth will soon be transformed according to Kim Jong Il's plan." This statement implies that the Russian specialist resents the current domination of imperialism in the world affairs. He sees protection solely in the Korean leader and pins his hopes for the future on Kim Jong Il.

Thus, North Korean propaganda employs (post-)Soviet figures as ostensibly objective mirrors reflecting the leader's greatness. However, such statements have greater credibility when they come from more

specific sources—and yet declining contact between post-Soviet Russia and North Korea was making it increasingly difficult to find reputable admirers of North Korea. Consequently, growing reliance was placed on fiction.

POST-SOVIET RUSSIA AND RUSSIANS IN LITERATURE

In the DPRK, the primary task of fiction has traditionally been social programming based on Stalinist principles of Socialist Realism (Gabroussenko, 2010, pp. 13-45). North Korean intellectuals have consistently expressed indignation over Russian authors' rejection of Socialist Realism. They lament that, "after socialism was subjected to reform and capitalism returned, the literature of the former USSR and Eastern Europe began to corrupt workers and the youth, encouraging crime, bourgeois morality and degeneracy. It has thus lost its supreme value as the science of the human being" (Chwadamhoe, 1993). Meanwhile, North Korean writers reaffirmed their commitment to addressing contemporary challenges through appropriate works. Writer Paek Ŭnp'al, for instance, noted that the collapse of socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe motivated him to write a new story about the leader's greatness, and the novella *Secretary of the Party Cell* (Paek, 1994).

Yet it took North Korean authors nearly a decade to respond to *Perestroika*. One of the earliest works was Paek Pohŭm's story *Separation and Meeting*, which depicts Kim Il Sung's conversations with Soviet Koreans—descendants of Korea's liberation fighters who visited the DPRK. The story features Kim Il Sung's reflections on the disintegration of world socialism. Condemning his interlocutors' political apathy—one woman is preoccupied with personal affairs, uninterested in politics and unaware of socialism's collapse—Kim Il Sung remarks: "Why did the Soviet Union collapse? It's perfectly clear. People were excluded from political life, their ideological education was disrupted. If people are made politically illiterate, how can socialism be maintained? After all, you are not the only one like this" (Paek, 1996, p. 14). This statement echoes Kim Il Sung's actual comments on *Perestroika*, which he blamed mostly on the masses' insufficient ideological engagement. Notably, *Separation and Meeting* contains no

description of post-Soviet realities or realistic portrayals of Russians, focusing instead on Kim Il Sung himself.

It was only around 2000 that images of Russians and modern Russia began to appear in North Korean literature, largely in one of the contexts: 1) the DPRK as a positive contrast to Russia; 2) the DPRK as Russia's hope and savior.

NORTH KOREA AS A POSITIVE CONTRAST TO RUSSIA

Ryang Ch'angjo, *The Second Briefing* (2000).
The story juxtaposes post-Soviet Russia and North Korea through the perspective of Shimada, a Japanese Marxist scholar who comes to Russia to understand the causes behind the USSR's collapse and to meet his colleague, Svidriy Ruzhanskiy (sic.).

Shimada is frustrated to see the country's profound transformation: the once-dominant state ideology has vanished, and the people are preoccupied with material pursuits. The Leninist red banner over the Kremlin has been replaced by the tricolor of the "Tsar's dead spirit." The Institute of Marxism-Leninism, once a model of the austere style with a golden sign and military-uniformed guards, is now dilapidated and guarded by an old porter in shabby clothes. Inside, books are strewn carelessly on the floor. When Shimada inquires about their fate, the indifferent porter says they will likely be recycled. Shimada is appalled at such sacrilege.

Ruzhansky, a staff member at the institute, is in despair. His son Glakov (sic.) was killed by a "democrat" during the October siege of parliament, trying to defend the country from capitalism's resurgence. Shimada recalls Ruzhansky's son as a "handsome, optimistic young student," who "sang patriotic songs with heartfelt emotion, with his mother accompanying him at the piano" (Ibid, p. 58).

From the gloomy Moscow torn by *Perestroika*, Shimada goes to Pyongyang. The North Korean capital appears as a "garden city," its streets lined with slogans lauding the Leader. Seeing Kim Jong Il's warm smile during a public ceremony, Shimada understands that "this great man is Korea's strength, the symbol of its independence, and the defender of socialism" (Ibid, p. 63).

The story offers no concrete details about everyday life in Russia, except for the changes in the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and the new flag over the Kremlin. Its author is clearly unfamiliar with the Russian language and contemporary society: the names Svidry and Glakov are artificial, the characters of Ruzhansky and his wife are schematic.

Rim Hwawŏn, *The Fifth Photograph* (2001).
This is a family saga about the Soviet victims of *Perestroika*.

Young beauty Katya Sintsova comes from a respectable family of Communist Party functionaries. Katya's great-grandfather, a Red Army soldier, perished in the Civil War, and her grandfather died defending the homeland from the Nazis in 1941. Her father, a high-ranking official in a regional Communist Party committee, is a selfless and honest man, and so is her brother Sergei, secretary of the *Komsomol*'s Moscow Municipal Committee. Katya's mother died when she was a child, so she became the center of attention for her father and brother. Katya was a hardworking and easygoing child, loved to draw, and cared for her family. But after finishing school and beginning study at an arts university, she changes. She falls under the influence of Westernized students who skip lectures, find *Komsomol* meetings boring, and spend their lives dancing and buying fashionable clothes. Her father and brother try to get Katya back on the right track, but fail.

To the family's horror, Katya begins meeting with foreigners. A young American, McConnolly, seduces Katya. He promises to marry her, but disappears after learning that she is pregnant. Katya has an abortion and sinks into depression.

Katya's personal tragedy, coupled with the country's decline under *Perestroika*, kill her father. His last words are: "Long live the Communist Party!" Katya mourns her father's death, but considers him a "foolish idealist."

Katya tries to sell four old photographs of her high-profile Communist ancestors on a boulevard, where Chinok, a North Korean translator, catches her in the midst of this shameful trade. Despite Katya's cynicism and brazen manner, she cannot bear Chinok's reproachful gaze, like "the voices of her conscience." She "senses an incomprehensible light coming from Chinok."

Katya travels abroad in search of her lover and discovers that her seduction was carefully orchestrated. It turns out that McConnolly is descended from a Russian émigré whose land was nationalized by Katya's great-grandfather during the Revolution, and the McConnollys have sworn revenge on her family.

From abroad, Katya writes a letter to her brother, admitting that he and their father were right about everything, and that she, not her father, was a "fool." However, she feels she has no choice but go to a brothel, "like Katya in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*." One day Katya suffers an accident, loses her leg, and becomes a one-legged prostitute in Munich attracting perverts.

A booklet from a Munich brothel containing Katya's photograph falls into Sergei's hands. This is the last, fifth photograph of a member of the Sintsov dynasty.

The Sintsovs are contrasted to the family of Chinok, a pure and beautiful forty-year-old woman, married to an officer and mother of three children. Chinok happens to witness a road accident in which Sergei, drunk, is hit by a car. The driver does not stop to help the injured man, and Chinok takes Sergei to hospital. Visiting Sergei later in the hospital, Chinok learns about his family's tragic story, which caused his drinking habit. Sergei gives Katya's photograph to Chinok as a reminder to the Korean people that socialism must be defended. Sergei compares the great leader of the DPRK with the traitorous Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

Back home, Chinok shows Katya's photograph to her daughter. A high school graduate and talented violinist, the girl relinquishes the honor of entering a conservatory, where fame and fortune await, and follows her father and twin brothers—who were honored by a personal meeting with Kim Jong Il—into the army. Mother and daughter mourn Katya's unfortunate fate.

Rim Hwawŏn's story contains more details and Russian cultural allusions than Ryang Changjo's text, but not always ones that are applicable to contemporary Russia. For example, it is clearly a strained parallel that has been drawn between Tolstoy's Katya (a disenfranchised peasant girl forced into prostitution after being seduced by a young landowner) and the novel's Katya (a young Muscovite artist, from a

prominent family, living in sexually frivolous Russia of the 1990s). McConnolly's motive and means of revenge are even less plausible. But it is telling that the post-Soviet heroine is juxtaposed to (unequivocally positive) conservative traditional morality.

Just like Ryang Changjo's story, *The Fifth Photograph* is built on a sharp ideological contrast between hellish post-*Perestroika* Russia and blissful North Korea, repentant Russian "sinners" and North Korean "saints." All the characters in the story are infantilized and deprived of agency. Their fates are either punishments for disobeying the ruling party (Katya) and failing to uphold socialist values (the older generation of the Sintsov family), or rewards for loyalty to the Communist leader (Chinok's family).

Characteristic of the story is Chinok's salvation of Sergei, run over by an expensive car whose chauffeur (Sergei's own compatriot) kept driving. The Korean saint (accentuated by her "inner light," purity, and unfading beauty) saves the Russian sinner, drunk and depressed. Yet both sinners—Sergei and Katya—are portrayed with sympathy.

Later texts further develop the motif of North Koreans saving Russians.

NORTH KOREA AS RUSSIA'S HOPE AND SAVIOR

Chung Yong Jong, *Dawn* (2001).
Communist Simkov is upset by a conflict with his family. His son-in-law Boris, who works for a large trading company, and his daughter Olga, a beautiful actress, beg him to quit his long-held job as custodian of Yaroslavsky Station's ideological heritage. For years, this job was considered honorable, but now it is barely different from a cleaner, and moreover one who is not even equipped to carry out his duties. The famous monument to Lenin, with his arm pointing eastward to the "path of Yermak," is weather-beaten and dirty, as no funds are allocated for its preservation.

Furthermore, in the new political situation, Simkov's job is considered socially compromised. Boris, who had previously treated his father-in-law with respect at work, now openly calls Simkov "Lenin's ghost" and a "Don Quixote" who does not understand the changing times, and

calls his work "pathetic" (Ibid, p. 48). Olga apologizes to her father for this rudeness but asks him to resign so as not to create problems for his beloved granddaughter Tonechka, whose birthday is soon.

Simkov submits a letter of resignation, but feels as if he "has signed an abdication from his own life" (Ibid, p. 49). However, he is urgently summoned back to work. It turns out that Kim Jong Il's train will be arriving at Yaroslavsky Station, and the authorities have decided to urgently refurbish the monument to Lenin. Simkov is to oversee this work.

Simkov recalls how his daughter, who performed at the April Friendship Festival in Pyongyang last year, spoke of the "inner light" coming from Kim Jong Il. Telling his daughter that he cannot come home for his granddaughter's birthday because he is too busy readying the monument for the Korean leader's arrival, Simkov says about Kim Jong Il: "Even if I am unable to see this man, I will see his light" (Ibid, p. 51).

Olga and Tonechka come to the train station with flowers for Kim Jong Il.

As Kim Jong Il's train approaches the station, Simkov looks at the renovated Lenin, whose eyes seem to "blaze with a special light."

After meeting the leader, Olga enthusiastically exclaims: "It's impossible to look directly at Kim Jong Il's smile. It's warm, dazzling, and full of a charming gleam that literally draws you in. In his smile lies the soul of an eastern saint" (Ibid, p. 53).

Although the author employs certain realistic details of Russia (descriptions of Moscow and actual Russian names), the story is a mere projection of North Korea. Soviet/Russian railway stations have never employed 'ideological supervisors,' and the Russian characters describe Kim Jong Il with mystical metaphors common to North Korean political vocabulary.

The story underscores that socialist Korea is becoming a guiding star for Russia. Lenin's Mausoleum, visited by crowds of people in the Soviet Union, yet nearly abandoned in post-Soviet Russia, is treasured anew after Kim Jong Il visits.

Simkov attributes some positive changes in the country—the introduction of benefits for veterans, recognition of Russia's historical

achievements, and respect for national traditions—to Putin's visit to the DPRK and the impression made upon him by Kim Jong Il's three-year mourning for his father. "And this is right. Today cannot exist in isolation from yesterday. We cannot be Yermak's heirs if we forget Lenin, who united peoples. Why not think well of Communist ideology? Isn't this what the leader of socialist Korea, Kim Jong Il, teaches us?" Simkov says (Ibid, p. 52).

The story ends with the exclamation: "The dawn of a new social teaching has come from the East, from the DPRK! Forward, follow this dawn!" (Ibid, p. 53).

Ri Kŭmch'ŏl. *Change Course!* (2004) (Ri Kŭmch'ŏl, 2004).

Perestroika also features in North Korea's favorite genre of realistic science fiction, also common in Stalin's USSR (Ivanov, 1950; Arbitman, 2021). *Perestroika* underlies the conflict in Ri Kŭmch'ŏl's story.

Kim Sŏkjin, a young North Korean diplomat, is returning home from an overseas assignment on an American airliner with 250 passengers. He befriends two Russian passengers, astrophysics professor Vassily Ivanovich and his beautiful daughter Nina. The professor explains that after *Perestroika*, he immigrated to the United States, lured by the false rhetoric of freedom and democracy, but soon regretted his decision. The Americans engaged him in a project ostensibly related to a space program, but actually developing space weapons. Vassily refused to cooperate with the "merchants of war" and is now returning home, with an urn containing the ashes of his wife, who died in a suspicious road accident in New York.

Shortly after takeoff, it turns out that the plane is carrying a time bomb, set to detonate once it reaches an altitude of 3,000 meters. This is the American intelligence agencies' revenge on the Russian professor for refusing to cooperate. The previous attempt to kill him, in a car crash, succeeded only in killing his wife.

Kim Sŏkjin remains the only person on board who maintains his composure and presence of mind. He quickly becomes the informal leader of panic-stricken passengers. Kim advises the professor to publicly announce his refusal to cooperate with the American space weapons program, and Vassily Ivanovich readily agrees. The Korean

diplomat demands the crew change course and fly to North Korea, where military specialists use unique antigravity technology to stop the plane in mid-air and deactivate the bomb.

The rescued passengers rush to Kim Sŏkjin, offering him money and gifts for their rescue. Kim declines the gifts, declaring that their rescue is not his personal achievement, but that of his socialist homeland.

In this story, a North Korean rises above foreigners with his fortitude, willpower, quick reflexes, and exemplary moral character. He is also physically stronger than the others. When Nina is attacked by two American drug-addicted rapists armed with guns, Kim disarms both with his bare hands. Kim Sŏkjin is indifferent to material benefits. He refuses to accept the gifts—just like in the story recounted by Kim Il Sung mentioned above, when Soviets declined even foreigners' gifts of pens.

The North Korean superman-diplomat derives his strength from his home country. Kim believes that "the socialist motherland will never betray its children."

Kim Sŏkjin's bravery and confidence are contrasted with the childish helplessness of the Russian characters. In the situation of general confusion, the Korean diplomat holds his Russian friends' hands, reassuring them. Nina is portrayed as particularly childish. Even after learning about her father's conflict with the American military, she cannot understand why these "bad people" tried to kill her father. Her father simplifies the story for her, saying: "It's all about money, dear. They're afraid they'll lose it if I open my mouth."

The Russian heroine's childishness is offset by her tenderness and beauty. The Russian professor's daughter provides a pleasant contrast to the vulgar Western passengers.

The story ascribes the same contrasting qualities to the countries its characters come from, comparing Russia's credulity with North Korea's foresight. While Russia disarmed itself in relations with the West, trusting in the latter's deceitful calls for peace, far-sighted North Korea continued to develop its military technology, ultimately saving the innocent passengers, including the Russians.

The DPRK's prudent international behavior wins its admirers among the Russians. In his interview with foreign correspondents,

Vassily Ivanovich supports North Korea's military program, emphasizing its defensive nature. He believes that the antigravity technology will help create an "iron shield" over North Korea.

* * *

Perestroika was long a key topic in North Korean leaders' speeches. Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il both saw it as a catastrophe caused by the treachery of part of the Soviet elite, but Kim Il Sung saw it mainly through the lens of the Khrushchev era, while Kim Jong Il focused on averting something similar in the DPRK. Specifically, he called for rejecting formalistic and bureaucratic attitudes in the party, which lead to losing touch with the masses and control over public sentiment. He also emphasized the need for party cadres' loyalty to the leader, warned against trusting "imperialists" and "reactionaries," and proclaimed that he would not permit liberal reforms. To counter liberal sentiments, the traditions of the Juche state would have to be strengthened. Culture should promote socialist ideology, buildup of the country's defenses, and the strong position of the leader and the state.

Both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il often illustrated their positions regarding *Perestroika* by pointing to the policies and culture of Stalin's USSR. Stalin and his comrades remained examples of true Russian leaders.

Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il believed that *Perestroika* brought no benefit to the masses in the former socialist countries, and that sooner or later those countries would see a socialist revival. They found support for these conclusions in personal conversations with Russian citizens visiting the DPRK.

Following Kim Jong Il's directives, North Korean journalism and fiction began to shape the cultural discourse on *Perestroika*. Not all texts adequately understood Russian realities; depiction of Russia was often schematic and primitive. But conceptually, they were unified in the description of *Perestroika* as a "wind of temptation" for the DPRK, which would bring only grief to the people and ruin to the state.

The literary portrayal of *Perestroika* is characterized by a positive attitude towards Russia and Russians, who are described as an intelligent, educated, and beautiful people suffering from the

destruction of socialism. Russians during *Perestroika* are depicted in a manner following the colonial-era Korean literary canon—authors like Ri Kiyŏng, Chae Mansik, Yi Kwangsu, Hyŏn Chin'gŏn, and others, who described victims of social injustice in the 1920s and 1930s. Such motifs abound in *The Fifth Photograph*, where a young man drinks himself into despair and is hit by a car, and a young girl is disgraced and forced into prostitution. The Russian characters' attempts to fight *Perestroika* alone, without the support of a leader, are doomed to fail (in *The Second Briefing*, Ruzhansky's son dies during the assault of the White House in Moscow in 1993).

In general, the victimized Russian characters are unable to resist the temptations into which the country's "criminal leadership" (plunges them: young people lose faith in Communist ideals (Katya Sintsova and her classmates in T*he Fifth Photograph*), middle-aged people turn into ideological conformists (Olga and Boris in Dawn), and the older generation succumbs to the onslaught of new materialism (Ruzhansky in *The Second Briefing*, Simkov in Dawn, the elder Sintsovs in *The Fifth Photograph*, Vassily Ivanovich in *Change Course!*). Their weakness is a consequence of the lack of a worthy leader.

The DPRK is presented as Russians' only hope and savior. In contrast to the depressed and weak Russian characters, Koreans appear as steadfast, cheerful, and energetic people who come to the Russians' aid in emergencies. Unlike gullible Russians, Koreans do not follow the West's lead and develop their own military technology, which helps them not only survive, but also defend their friends.

The source of Koreans' strength is the Leader, whose various virtues are described in hyperbolic terms reminiscent of a deity. It is Kim Jong Il who inspires Russian leader Putin to restore Russia's national traditions and symbols.

The contrast between traitorous *Perestroika* and steadfast 'Socialism of Our Style' is symbolized by flags—the proud red banner of the DPRK and the restored tricolor of the Russian Empire—the embodiment of the "spirit of the dead tsar."

The North Korean narrative of Perestroika, based on a dichotomy of leaders-as-traitors and people-as-victims, has had far-reaching consequences for Russia-DPRK relations. First, the North Korean

cultural space preserved Soviet culture as the product of an "ideologically correct" people. Later, it incorporated some ideologically neutral post-Soviet works. This resulted in the popularity of some modern Russian TV series and of concerts by Yaroslav Dronov (Shaman), and the inclusion of Russian and Soviet songs in the repertoire of popular North Korean singers—Kim Okju, Ch'ŏe Sŏlhŭi, Ch'a Yunmi, and others.

In North Korea under Kim Jong Un, the topic of *Perestroika* has disappeared from the media. Presumably, the country has gone a long way from the Arduous March and the economic crisis associated with the collapse of the international socialist bloc, which is now a distant memory. Also, in contrast to his father and grandfather, young Kim Jong Un does not see Perestroika as an emotionally charged phenomenon. The country has entered a new period of development, where the absence of a global socialist system is perceived as the default international situation rather than an unfortunate aberration resulting from someone's missteps.

Over these years, no new works of culture addressing Perestroika have been created, and those made earlier are seldom broadcast. Exceptions are quite rare.

On 9 September 2021, during the celebrations of the Republic's 73rd anniversary, the song *Socialism Is Ours*, composed in 1992 as a reaction to the collapse of global socialism, was performed (Meari, 2022). In its content, this song was out of place: it promises loyalty to the red flag, despite its rejection by other unnamed countries: "We will not follow foreign customs and foreign trends. Though the winds are strong, we will endure." The song was probably selected for its well-known rhythmic melody, good for mass dancing.

In mid-2025, the April 25th Film Studio released the film *Days and Nights of Confrontation*, a reference to Perestroika (Taegyŏrŭi nat kwa pam, 2025). This political thriller, telling the story of a conspiracy against Kim Jong Il in the mid-1990s, features *Perestroika* as an opportune moment to activate sleeper agents in North Korea. In his confession to an investigator, the film's antagonist says that *Perestroika* had weakened North Korea's international and domestic position and signaled to him that overthrowing the country's leadership was

possible. However, eventually, the enemy's hopes are dashed, and North Korea and its people prove stronger.

The narrative of the DPRK as a savior of the Russian people, created in North Korean culture in the early 2000s, miraculously became reality in 2025, when North Korean forces participated in liberating and demining parts of Russia's Kursk Oblast. The narrative played a certain role in legitimizing this involvement in the Special Military Operation.

The currently evolving discourse regarding these events deserves a separate extensive study. Here it is worth noting that, in current North Korean literature on the SMO, the Russian tricolor is viewed as a symbol of modern friendly Russia and its army.

Importantly, in North Korean culture, the rhetoric of support for socialism and opposition to *Perestroika* is free of reference to economic issues. The Arduous March triggered the spontaneous development of the private market and entrepreneurship, which the Juche state effectively tolerates, but which find no reflection in the state ideology that continues to proclaim an invariable socialist course based on national unity and loyalty to the motherland and its Leader.

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