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Author: Yoon, Min-Kyung

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Introduction

A warren of mystery, shrouded in veil, the only land where in the words of anthropologist Sonia Ryang, “no outside ethnographer has ventured with the specific purpose of conducting anthropological fieldwork,”¹ the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) continues to elude our full comprehension. Much has been written about North Korea, its political brinkmanship, its economic and humanitarian disasters, its idiosyncratic, one of a kind three-generation of absolute leaders. Politics continue to dominate the international discourse on North Korea, frequently splattered by the news of human rights abuses brought to light by defectors and activists. An object of ridicule, parodies, and satire, North Korea and its leaders have even become a source of tongue-in-cheek entertainment in Western media.

As the last bastion of totalitarianism, captivating the world with its dynastic ruling family and incessant political intrigue and categorized as the recalcitrant and loathed “Other” in the West,² North Korea provokes a sharp divide between conservatives and liberals, eliciting abhorrence and curiosity for some. In contrast to the wealth of literature and media analysis on the political regime of North Korea, what remains visibly absent in the discourse on North Korea is an analysis of North Korean society from the inside out rather than the outside in. In the past several years, a movement toward this endeavor has been underway, particularly in the field of academia, with the emergence of books dedicated to illuminating various aspects of North Korean society never before considered.³ While these works are useful and informative,

¹ Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 2.

² Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004), viii.

³ For example, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* by Charles K. Armstrong; *Art Under Control in North Korea* by Jane Portal; *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* by Suk-Young Kim; *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding* and *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* by Sonia Ryang; *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* by Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung; *Exploring North*

providing an understanding of the development and evolution of North Korean cultural production, research on art is underrepresented and a larger framework from which to situate North Korean art is virtually lacking.

This dissertation contributes to the growing literature on North Korean society and culture, seeking to provide further analysis, a deeper understanding of a society that is politically volatile and polarizing, yet an important player to be reckoned with in the geopolitics of today's world. North Korea is all too often approached from an international relations or political science perspective and more effort is needed to understand how North Korea functions from the inside, or the inner workings of North Korean society. To understand the political dynamics of any society necessitates an understanding of its people, history, and culture. The field of humanities serves as the bedrock for unearthing how a group of people who share a common value system defines its relationship with peoples within and without its boundaries. With the steady prominence and growing relevance of the field of peace and unification studies in South Korea, this knowledge becomes all the more crucial. An examination of North Korean culture complements the knowledge and insights gained from political analysis, eyewitness accounts from journalists, and memoirs from defectors to provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of a society still deeply closed and unknown to the outside world.

Korean Arts edited by Rüdiger Frank; *Han Sorya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist realism in the DPRK* and *The Cleanest Race* by Brian Myers; and *De-Bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy* edited by Valérie Gelézeau, Koen De Ceuster, and Alain Delissen.

The following are some recent South Korean publications on North Korean culture: *Pukhan yŏnghwasa* by Lee Myŏngja; *Pukhan yŏnghwa sok ūi salm iyagi*, *Pukhan ūi taejung munhwa*, *Pukhan ūi munhak kwa yesul*, and *Munhwa ro ilnŭn pukhan* by Chŏn Yŏngsŏn; and *Pukhan ūi Munhwa Chŏngch'aek* by Chŏng Ch'ŏrhyŏn.

Dissertations on North Korean culture and history have also sprouted, including “Politics of Empowerment: Everyday Life within the North Korean Revolution” by Suzy Kim (University of Chicago); “The Furnace is Burning: Work and the Everyday Life in North Korea, 1953-1961” by Cheehyung Kim (Columbia University), “State Father, Mother Party: Family Concepts in North Korean Film” (in German) by Sun-Ju Choi (University of Tübingen); and “North Korean Literature: Margins of Writing Memory, Gender, and Sexuality” by Immanuel J. Kim (University of California-Riverside) with more in the works.

As North Korea continues to grab global headlines for its numerous failings and political tactics, interest in North Korea remains high and a continuing stream of political analysis is being churned out partly to meet this demand. However, as Charles Armstrong notes, a trend in the study of North Korea in recent years has been to move beyond the diplomatic politics and into the everyday lives of the North Korean people, including an examination of culture.⁴ The continuing existence of North Korea despite predictions of its imminent collapse demands a fuller, more substantive understanding of the North Korean people and culture because such an understanding offers an opportunity to address North Korea in potentially new and creative ways.

Research on North Korean society and culture is underway due to the increased interest in North Korea and the accessibility of previously unavailable North Korean primary sources in South Korea has especially fuelled this endeavor. This movement is heartening for opening and expanding the way toward gaining a much needed comprehensive knowledge of North Korea. This dissertation is a contribution to the growing scholarship on North Korean society and culture and seeks to continue a dialogue began by scholars on how to understand and crack the surface of a country known as much for its failings as for its opaqueness. In the field of art, this dissertation continues on the path began by Janet Portal in *Art Under Control In North Korea*, the first English-language book on North Korean art, Koen De Ceuster on the rearing and being an artist in North Korea and South Korea's encounter with North Korean art, Marsha Haufler on the development of mosaics, Frank Hoffmann on the birth of chosŏnhwa, an East Asian ink and brush painting and a term only used in North Korea, and Pak Kyeri on the power struggles within

⁴ Charles K. Armstrong, "Trends in the Study of North Korea." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70 (2011): 357-371.

the revolutionary art establishment during the early years of the DPRK and the resulting restriction of what was deemed stylistically and thematically acceptable.⁵

Scholarship on North Korean culture and society also extends beyond the field of art. In literature, Brian R. Myers' analysis on the writer Han Sŏr-ya as part of the development of North Korean literature during the formative years of the DPRK is one of the first explorations in the West with North Korean literature.⁶ Tatiana Gabroussenko explores the relationship between the Soviet Union and North Korea and the significant influences the Soviet Union had on the development of North Korean literature and literary policy.⁷ Sonia Ryang also contributes to this field, examining how the connection between the people and the Great Leader (Kim Il Sung) is established and solidified through an exploration of literature from the 1970s and 1980s by focusing on the themes of love, war, and self.⁸ In a recent dissertation, Immanuel J. Kim illuminates how literature offers a window into exploring a plurality of readings rather than a single reflection of state ideology, traveling into the realm of the writers' imaginations where individual characters rationalize and grapple with their identities and living conditions.⁹ In the field of history, Suzy Kim explores the everyday lives of the people by examining the inner workings and dynamics of people's committees and local politics in North Korea during the formative years of the DPRK while Cheehyung Kim examines how work and the everyday life

⁵ For the articles by Koen De Ceuster, Marsha Haufler, and Frank Hoffmann see *Exploring North Korean Arts*, ed. by Rüdiger Frank (Vienna: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2011) and *De-Bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy*, ed. by [Valérie Gelézeau](#), Koen De Ceuster, and Alain Delissen (London: Routledge, 2013). For Pak Kyeri's article, see "Kim Ilsŏng-ŭi misullon: Chosŏnhwa sŏngnip kwajŏng-ŭl chungsim-ŭro," in *T'ongil munje* 15, no. 1 (May 2003): 289-309.

⁶ See Brian R. Myers, *Han Sorya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist realism in the DPRK* (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1994).

⁷ See Tatiana Gabroussenko, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korea Literature and Literary Policy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

⁸ See Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea*.

⁹ Immanuel J. Kim, "North Korean Literature: Margins of Writing Memory, Gender, and Sexuality," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California-Riverside, 2012.

of North Korea after the Korean War were under the control of the production regime, yet also a space where individuals struggled against the system.¹⁰

Suk-Young Kim analyzes state-produced propaganda—stage performances, film productions, parades, mass games, and visual arts—to argue that North Korea is a theatrical state par excellence, where the utopian illusion created in propaganda is mandated to be emulated by the people in their everyday lives, the people transformed into actors playing roles from revolutionary operas under the direction of the state.¹¹ The idea of the theater state is further explored by Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung. Kwon and Chung explore how the production of revolutionary art consolidated Kim Jong Il’s charismatic power and hereditary authority, resulting in a modern theater state.¹² Both Kim and Kwon and Chung provide a thoughtful and incisive view, tackling the important question of what drives the remarkable resilience of the North Korean state since its formation in 1948. As Kim describes the massive parade commemorating the fifty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the North Korean state in the opening of her book, she asks:

Amid a series of intense political/economic crises and international conflicts, North Korea has staged an unflinching display of patriotism, the massive scale of which exhausts even those who merely watch. Why is North Korea so obsessed with theatrical presentation of this idealized self-assessment while its political, economic, and sociocultural reality presents

¹⁰ Suzy Kim, “Politics of Empowerment: Everyday Life within the North Korean Revolution (1945-1950),” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2005.

Cheehyung Kim, “The Furnace is Burning: Work and the Everyday Life in North Korea, 1953-1961,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2010.

¹¹ Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 14.

¹² Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012).

a stark contrast? What is the rationale for an economically troubled nation's investing so many resources in daylong propaganda exercises?¹³

The seemingly desperate attempt by the North Korean state to control its society through precious capital invested in propaganda is indeed ironic considering the near bankrupt status of the North Korean economy and millions of its citizens starving. With the growing significance of North Korea in today's world, the questions posed by Kim are timely and this dissertation, too, continues this ongoing discussion on the resiliency of the North Korean state.

Many of the themes explored in the diverse fields by the scholars described above—the so-called failure of socialist realism in North Korea, Soviet influence on North Korean culture, the connection between the people and the Great Leader, and the vigor of the North Korean state despite political and economic odds—are all important themes that are explored, expanded, and, in the case of the failure of socialist realism, contested in this dissertation. This dissertation benefits from the research by Suk-Young Kim on various representations in North Korea. Yet unlike the previous scholarship that has already been conducted and described, this dissertation focuses on art through an examination of the visual representations captured in paintings and monuments, building from a larger framework to situate North Korean art and deepening our understanding of North Korea by bringing to light the important role visual images play in the politics of the North Korean state.

What makes analyzing North Korean art relevant and fascinating is partly due to the limited research on art, but also because of the wealth of information contained in North Korean primary materials on art that can be analyzed.¹⁴ Particularly insightful are the treatises on art,

¹³ Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea*, 3.

¹⁴ North Korean primary materials for this dissertation were accessed and collected from the South Korean Ministry of Unification's Information Center on North Korea in Seoul, South Korea.

which lay out the foundation for North Korean cultural production and provide the necessary theoretical framework from which to understand the production of North Korean culture. Art books and specialized yearbooks such as the *Chosŏn Misul Nyŏn'gam* and *Chosŏn Yesul* provide firsthand, visual access to actual cultural products. In addition, art critiques and reviews published in such specialized yearbooks and journals are a rich source of valuable information on how art functions in North Korea. School textbooks are also utilized because they show how North Korean art and history are taught, adding to the larger theoretical framework for this dissertation.

With the help of these sources, one way of examining North Korea from the inside out is to analyze how the ideological mobilization of society transpires through an analysis of visual representations. While a call for the importance of visual representations to better understand North Korea has been made in the field of international relations through an examination of Western visual representations of North Korea, this dissertation provides an analysis of North Korea's self-imposed visual representations of itself and its past.¹⁵ As part of this effort, I decipher the strategies and mechanisms at work in ideologically mobilizing the society through an examination of North Korean art, which is an aspect of North Korean culture that has not garnered as much academic attention as other cultural mediums of North Korea.¹⁶ This dissertation focuses on how North Korean art works through an analysis of the historical representations in North Korean paintings and monuments. Looking at historical representations in North Korean cultural production illuminates how politics converge with culture and the

¹⁵ David Shim and Dirk Nabers, "North Korea and the Politics of Visual Representations," GIGA Research Programme: Power, Norms and Governance in International Relations, Working Papers, No. 164, April 2011.

¹⁶ Most previous research on North Korean culture pertains to literature. In recent years, there has been an increase of research conducted on film, theater, music, and art. Although there are book chapters and articles on North Korean art, the only English-language book devoted to North Korean art as of yet is *Art Under Control in North Korea* by Jane Portal.

themes of politics of culture, cultural production, and historical representations depicted in cultural products are all touched upon in this dissertation.

To understand how North Korean art functions, understanding the space in which it is created—the space of power—is needed. That is, what are the underpinnings of a state? What constitutes power? Power does not only result from, or equate, the economy or the political. Power also derives from culture and this is what the politics of culture is about. The socialist construction of society, the shaping and molding of the masses is the driving force behind North Korea's cultural project. A transformation of the mind entails a complex dynamic between culture, politics, and history. It is through the cohesion of all three, creating a space of force that power becomes a means of both transcendence and repression. Michel Foucault, in his seminal analysis on power, asks the question, “What means are available to us today if we seek to conduct a non-economic analysis of power?” and argues that power is not solely “the maintenance and reproduction of economic relations, but is above all a relation of force.”¹⁷ To arrive at a “non-economic analysis of power” and to understand power as “a relation of force” to echo Foucault's words, tracing one of North Korea's spaces of power to its cultural production is informative. Looking at North Korea's cultural production as a locus of power, in fact, reveals the very essence that upholds the livelihood of the North Korean state.

Culture, thus, is an important medium for ideological mobilization in North Korea because it revolutionizes society to materialize the socialist transformation of the people. Within culture, the dramatization of history underscores the nexus between culture and history—the recreation of history in cultural production. In effect, history is used to establish and legitimate a post-revolutionized (socialist) society over a pre-revolutionized (non-socialist) society. To gain

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Harvester Press, 1980), 159.

perspective and insight in this process of mobilization and dramatization of history, North Korean primary materials on art and cultural production are examined and an analysis of historical representations in art allows determining the emotional effectiveness of such a strategy.

Narrative Turn

To provide a larger framework to situate the analysis on North Korean art, I begin the discussion with the “narrative turn.” The narrative turn focuses on the presentation of history.¹⁸ The concept of the narrative turn was originally set forth by Michel de Certeau in his *The Writing of History*. He argued that the past is not translated, but transformed or turned into a narrative construction. He further argued that the past can be understood and given meaning only with this narrative turning.¹⁹ Historical research provides facts about what happened, who was involved, when and where events happened, etc. While facts may be uncovered and gathered in the form of historical research, they must be turned and transformed to fit a specific narrative during the process of historical writing. Certain facts are selected while others are silenced. Certain elements are tweaked, added, and glossed over during the writing of history. History argues using a given set of facts about what happened in the past. Yet history needs to be convincing and in order to become persuasive an audience needs to connect emotionally with history. Through an emotional connection, history builds an identity for individuals and groups of people, situating the present and charting the future. The narrative turn is necessary because the emotional connection with history can be made through a process of selection and transformation of historical facts. Thus, historical writing is different from historical research

¹⁸ Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7.

¹⁹ See Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

because historical writing is essentially created.²⁰ The process of history writing deserves attention because it provides an understanding of how an individual and groups of people develop communal bonds, learning to share a common value system and forming a distinctive identity that distinguishes who they are from others.

The narrative turn is much more than only texts. It is also about images. Challenging the longstanding tendency in the fields of literature and history to prioritize interpretation, which deals with the discipline of hermeneutics, over representation (or the discipline of aesthetics), Frank Ankersmit argues that representation in actuality takes precedence over interpretation.²¹ He argues, “You cannot even begin to understand a text’s or a painting’s meaning (i.e. have an *interpretation* of it) as long as you have no idea of, or deliberately refrain from asking yourself, what the text or painting might be *about* (i.e. what it *represents*).”²² In his work on historical representations, Ankersmit speaks of the distinguishing mark of a representation:

We could liken historical reality to a classical theater where a great number of subsequent sets of scenery are placed at different distances from the proscenium. Which scenery will the historian focus his attention on? It seems as if there is no resistance preventing him from moving freely from one set of scenery to another. Nothing here is rigid and fixed; everything gives way easily under the slightest pressure. Representation is above all a question of demarcating contours, of indicating where one object or entity “ends” and another “begins.” Representation deals with the contrast between the foreground and the background, between what is important and what is irrelevant.²³

²⁰ The distinction between historical research and historical writing is further dealt with in Chapter 3.

²¹ Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 49-53.

²² *Ibid.*, 53.

²³ Frank Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 222.

In art, the narrative turn centers on the form of the images; that is, how history is being presented. This process can be examined through an analysis of the mechanisms and the workings of art, which is what ultimately makes art effective. The essence of art is to become touched and moved by an artwork. Art is all about emotion. It is here that history and art differ. History books offer genuine history, but they do not necessarily tie the people emotionally to history. While history argues, art overwhelms instantly through emotions, creating allegiance to a specific vision, underscoring the importance of art. History must be turned into an *emotionally* tangible entity to render a particular vision of the past useful for those in power. This process is accomplished in art, elucidating the narrative turn within the visual. As a result, the process of historical writing can be understood within the visual as well. Just as in texts, the demarcation of contours that Ankersmit speaks of, the clear delimitation of what is relevant and irrelevant is also set in place in the visual.

Visual Representations

Using the narrative turn to visual materials leads to the link between narrative history and visual representations. That is, how narrative history is turned and transformed into visual representations. An examination of visual representations is needed because visual narratives are mentioned, but rarely developed and analyzed in the study of history. In what Peter Burke calls the testimony of images, he argues that images, just like texts and oral testimonies, are also equally important as historical evidence.²⁴ Images, Burke further contends, are not only strictly

²⁴ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 14.

evidence. Instead, images are also about what the art historian Francis Haskell has called the “the impact of the image on the historical imagination.”²⁵ In other words, paintings and monuments, and so on, preserve the unutterable and invisible, allowing us “to share the non-verbal experiences or knowledge of past cultures.”²⁶ Thus, images allow us to imagine the past in all its potentialities.

As noted earlier, representation deals with the aesthetics and art is part of visual culture. A relatively new field, visual culture, according to Nicholas Mirzoeff, “is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology.”²⁷ He defines visual technology as, “any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet.”²⁸ Within culture, visual culture is important because visualizing allows the creation of something that is invisible to become visible. As Mirzoeff notes, the growing trend in the field of visual culture is “to visualize things that are not in themselves visual.”²⁹

In the field of visual culture, the tendency to classify art between “high” and “low” persists. Reminiscent of this tendency, a separation of the aesthetics and experience remains today by associating the aesthetic sublime with the religious sacred, leading to the notion of an “aesthetic autonomy,” according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.³⁰ Gumbrecht argues that the idea of an “aesthetic autonomy” is problematic because such an idea harks back to a time when art was defined by restrictive notions that led to exclusions. Instead, he breaks away from a strict reading of art and advocates a more dispersed, broader idea of what constitutes an aesthetic

²⁵ Francis Haskell, *History and its Images* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 7. Quoted in Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, 13.

²⁶ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, 13.

²⁷ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Worlds: Reclaiming an Unredeemed Utopian Motif,” *New Literary History* 37, no. 2, *Critical Inquiries* (2006): 299-318.

pleasure. He redefines the aesthetic experience in terms of the everyday, where “moments of aesthetic experience happen as ‘crises’ in the literal sense of the word, that is, as interruptions of everyday experience.”³¹ He offers the following three modalities to support his idea: something ordinary presented differently, the equation of functionality with aesthetic pleasure, and viewing a familiar object in a new light.³² Thus, an aesthetic experience can happen outside of a museum and in the daily routines of the everyday.

How narrative history is turned into visual representations can be analyzed through the dramatization of history, which is essentially about visualizing the invisible. The term the dramatization of history stems from Beth S. Wright’s analysis of history paintings from nineteenth-century France. In a chapter titled “Witnesses to Catastrophe: The Dramatization of History” from her book *Painting and History During the French Revolution*, Wright proceeds to describe the dramatic personification of history in nineteenth-century French history paintings.³³ “Dramatic,” according to Wright, refers mostly to the gestural vocabulary of paintings, which have the effects of staging and theatrics. Although Wright situates her analysis in a very specific context where an ideological shift appears in history paintings, the dramatization of history can be understood and further developed in a broader context.

As the dramatic personification of history, the dramatization of history is about the grand gestures of individuals, the canvas of a painting and the public space where monuments stand as

³¹ Ibid., 302.

³² Ibid., 302-314.

³³ Beth S. Wright, *Painting and History During the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 77-120.

Wright situates the rise of dramatic historical paintings and the tensions that ensued between the Conservatives (pro-monarchy) and Liberals (anti-monarchy) regarding them. Dramatic historical paintings were advocated by the Conservatives because the paintings featured mostly monarchs and leaders, which served as representations for political institutions, and sought to evoke the sympathy and respect for these leaders. The history captured in these paintings was a moral history. For the Conservatives, they selected episodes that embodied larger truths to depict in paintings. Packaged and codified, history (the past) was systematized for the viewer to contemplate as “witnesses.” The Liberals complained that dramatic historical paintings lacked historical truth, that dramatic staging of history reduced the complexity of social experience (Ibid.)

a stage from which one witnesses a scene from an unfolding drama. History becomes a drama. Using this metaphor, the blank canvas and public space are used to write history in a dramatic fashion similar to a drama unfolding in several acts. One obvious element of a drama is emotion. Thus, the dramatization of history is about emotion that is totalizing and instantly overwhelming, not about factual history and offering deep scholarly and intellectual insights. The dramatization of history is also about heroes and heroines. By presenting the extraordinary and exemplary deeds of specific individuals, the dramatization of history instills values and fuels motivation, serving as an impetus for action. The focus on select heroes and heroines leads to glorification and in the extreme case, the personality cult, which is another aspect of the dramatization of history. Through the stories of heroes and heroines and their acts, history is didactic and teleological. As a result, dramatization of history is about truthfulness, which is not something that is factually true, but something that is right and proper. Truthfulness is the way history should be rather than it actually is; hence the dramatic element. Translated onto a canvas and the public space, truthfulness transforms history into a rightful, moral history. By focusing on heroes and heroines and presenting a moral history, the dramatization of history is also about monumentality, where the complexities of social experience are reduced to a single individual and a single story that are totalizing and overarching. In this respect, the moral history that is presented is monumental, or the monumentality of history.

Within this context, the dramatization of history is related to the rise of nationalism. As Anthony D. Smith has studied, national identities in Western Europe from the seventeenth to early nineteenth-centuries effectively utilized art to make the burgeoning concept of the nation real.³⁴ By focusing on the cases of the Netherlands, Britain, and France, Smith explores how

³⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe 1600-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

visual artists, mostly painters and sculptors, produced images of abstract notions such as the nation and national identity and rendered them tangible, concrete, and real. Concepts such as the nation and national identity, according to Smith, are largely ideal-type definitions. In order to make the national ideal meaningful for the people within the designated national community, the national ideal must be grasped concretely. Smith lays out how the national ideal is grasped tangibly in the following terms:

The ideal of autonomy must be shown through the struggles of heroes and heroines, that of unity through the compact of its citizens, the need for distinctiveness through the particular national events and atmosphere conjured by historical imagination and recorded with archaeological accuracy. In other words, the nation must be made to seem '*real*'; it must appear 'natural' and 'continuous', enveloping its members and carrying them along on a foreordained trajectory, while being felt to demand their total loyalty by summoning them to virtuous, even heroic, deed on 'its' behalf.³⁵

All of the elements of the dramatization of history can be seen here. The emphasis on the struggles of heroes and heroines that can be translated into personality cults, presentation of values through a moral history, becoming moved by emotion to act, and the reduction of social experience to a foreordained trajectory can be gleaned.

Making the nation and the national ideal real through the dramatization of history goes in tandem with the development of history paintings. The national ideal in the Western European context is endowed with a teleological sense of history and destiny, where individual parts

³⁵ Ibid., 8.

cohere to form an organic whole.³⁶ History paintings, which took off during the mid eighteenth-century, and their characteristics prove especially useful in rendering a vision into a concrete form. As Roy Strong notes, history also begins with pictures, “not those dry-as-dust reproduction of old portraits and tombs, dead artefacts now in museums and ancient buildings, but something much more powerful, images which swung wide a window into the past, made it human, living and real.”³⁷ What makes images powerful is the emotionality of the scenes comprised of glorified individuals. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century British painters sought to capture the essence of the Victorian age by drawing from the British past, depicting scenes of great bravery, self-sacrifice, noble love, and triumphant faith,³⁸ all elements deeply imbued with emotion. These were scenes marked by the heroism of individuals, national in content rather than classical, fitting the genre of history. As the American painter Benjamin West expressed in 1809:

...the art of painting has powers to dignify man, by transmitting to posterity his noble actions, and his mental powers, to be viewed in those invaluable lessons of religion, love of country, and morality; such subjects are worthy of the pencil, they are worthy of being placed in view as the most instructive records to a rising generation.³⁹

West’s remarks eloquently captured the guiding principles for discovering a new nationalistic iconography to recreate the past. Such a theoretical vision aesthetically steered how British

³⁶ Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe 1600-1850*, 8.

³⁷ Roy Strong, *Painting the Past: The Victorian Painter and British History* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16. Quoted from Grose Evans, *Benjamin West and the Taste of his Times* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1959), 31.

painters re-imagined and reinvented their past through the production of history paintings that flourished and gained importance due to massive commissions from the state and premiums.⁴⁰

The process of rendering an abstract notion into a real entity through the dramatization of history is applicable elsewhere outside of Western Europe. In essence, giving form to the invisible, a vision that had never been imagined and articulated before, is what the Western European nationalist history paintings sought to achieve. By visually articulating this new vision of the nation and the national ideal, a new reality is created that replaces the present, emotionally connecting the people to a larger, collective identity. This similar process of replacing the present with an ideal is seen in the socialist realist art of the Soviet Union. While mainstream scholarship and conceptions in capitalist societies have largely categorized socialist culture almost exclusively as political propaganda imposed and transpired in a top-down manner, lacking any aesthetic significance, Evgeny Dobrenko goes against the traditional grain and argues that in the context of Stalinism, socialism did not produce socialist realism to “prettify reality”; rather, the opposite is true. Socialist realism produced socialism, giving socialism substance and material form and elevating it to reality.⁴¹ Through this process, according to Dobrenko, the de-realizing of everydayness transpired and art played such a vital role that without it, socialism could not have materialized.⁴²

Just as the nation is made real in art, socialism is elevated to reality by socialist realism, which is largely an aesthetics project. What is created is a vision of a socialist world that the people can emotionally connect with, reinforcing their part in a larger, collective identity. The vision of a socialist world that is represented in art also replaces the realities of the everyday. It

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴² Ibid., 5. Socialist realism and Evgeny’s Dobrenko’s argument are further examined in Chapter 1.

is an alternate for reality, which seeks to compensate the difficulties and tensions of everyday life. The representation of the new reality, thus, does not reflect the realities of the everyday. Instead, it is an ideal. Referring to the origins of art, Arthur C. Danto argues that artistic representation of reality is not a direct imitation of reality, but a substitute for reality, underscoring how socialist art is not all that different from other forms of non-socialist art.⁴³

If the utopian vision that substitutes reality is a representation removed from the everyday reality, how is the apparent tension between an ideal and the daily reality resolved? A strategy that is employed is repetition. By repeating the utopian vision in art, the vision becomes real. This is what Dobrenko means when “by replicating reality, it becomes tantamount to reality.”⁴⁴ Reminiscent of the culture industry and its banal, numbing reproduction of mass culture in Western capitalist societies famously coined and decried by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer,⁴⁵ the socialist version of the culture industry, too, exists in North Korea, functioning in a similar manner. Just as mass-produced culture in capitalist societies seeks to satisfy the needs of capitalism, the mass-produced culture in socialist states seek to satisfy the needs of socialism.

Politics of North Korean Art

Like Soviet socialist realist art, North Korean art also builds from Western European traditions. As a case study, North Korean art illuminates how the salient links to Western

⁴³ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 20.

⁴⁴ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, 23.

⁴⁵ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007) and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001).

European traditions contribute to the lasting endurance of the North Korean state. The formation of the North Korean state that began after liberation from Japan in 1945 and culminated in the establishment of the DPRK in 1948 centered on a form of nation-building rooted in socialism. Consequent on the failure of the Korean War (1950-1953) to unify the Korean peninsula, this nation-building project became all the more imperative and intensive. From the 1950s to the 1970s, much of the foundation for the North Korean state was established, running the gamut from economic development to ideological mobilization. The eruption of the Korean War in 1950, the dedication to massive reconstruction efforts during the post-Korean War years, and the promulgation of Kim Il Sung's personality cult during the late 1960s to the 1970s that proved to be so successful, contributed significantly to the formation of the North Korean state.⁴⁶

During this time of nation-building, material measures, such as land and labor reforms, took shape to provide a blueprint for a socialist state. In tandem with the structural and material engineering of society, subjective measures, such as the people's socialist consciousness and awakening, had to be tackled. In this regard, ideology was mobilized to materialize a transformation entailing not something quantifiable, but more qualitative—a transformation of the mind. To undertake this task of transforming the people's consciousness, the North Korean state resorted to culture as one of the tools to propagate the correct ideology by weaving history into cultural products. As a result, both culture and history were politicized, serving as mechanisms for the legitimization of the North Korean state. What occurred was the dramatization of history in cultural production to revolutionize society and through this process the creation of a dominant historical narrative, presented as the absolute, single truth of Korean history.

⁴⁶ In actuality, Kim Il Sung had already developed a personality cult around himself well before the Korean War. See Charles K. Armstrong *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950-1962* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 102.

The politicization of culture, which was a top-down, vertical movement, served as an instrument to eliminate the bourgeois and colonial remnants that were deemed dangerous for the socialist state. It served essentially as a means of transporting a vision to something tangible, something that could be seen, felt, and experienced. Through cultural production, which was “national in form, socialist in content,”⁴⁷ history was mobilized to serve ideological purposes and culture was another tool for ideological control. Moreover, the historical narrative propagated by the North Korean was an exclusive, total summation. In this narrative, historical representations that glorify the anti-Japanese activities of Kim Il Sung, vilify the American and Japanese imperialists and South Korean sycophants, and deify Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were mobilized to create a distinct past that explains the present and dictates the future. Such historical representations extracted from the dominant narrative provided an overarching truth, legitimizing the North Korean state and positioning its leaders as the rightful heirs to Korean history.

In North Korean art, the representations of good versus evil that exhort citizens to the cause of revolution are the state’s rendition of the past, or its history. Yet what does history mean for North Korea? History is as much about the present and future as it is about the past. History serves a teleological purpose—legitimizing and justifying the state and the ruling family in the case of North Korea. In the discourse of the philosophy of history, history is goal-oriented, tied with intention, and constantly molding and remolding the past in response to a predetermined purpose to which a specific, ongoing action may refer. The past is shaped and reshaped to meet a future-oriented goal.⁴⁸ History is manifested as a single, totalizing narrative, silencing those stories at odds with the dominant narrative. As argued by Jörn Rüsen, a sense of

⁴⁷ Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 190.

⁴⁸ Jörn Rüsen, “Sense of History: What does it mean? With an Outlook onto Reason and Senselessness,” in *Meaning and Representation in History*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 41.

belongingness, or collective identity, is shaped by and tethered to history.⁴⁹ A collective identity based on common history explains the present and steers the future. Given the importance of history in North Korea as a political tool, it is worthwhile and interesting to look at how history legitimates the state and its leaders, creating a collective identity for the people. Propaganda is an obvious choice, but culture, particularly the fine arts, plays a significant role in this process. Art is useful for propaganda because it is visual and experiential and within propaganda, history is an important instrument. The (re)imagination of the past is made concrete through the narrative turn. In other words, the past (as in what happened) needs to be turned into a persuasive narrative that befits the interests of those with a stake in the viability of the new, transformed narrative.

Many instruments are used to impregnate the vision of the North Korean state and its leaders as the legitimate subjects of Korean history. History education, popular culture, propaganda, and the totalitarian state are all prominent examples. Although these instruments are not listed in any particular order, I highlight how history education contributes to creating a specific vision of the North Korean state because of the importance of history as a political tool. History textbooks are useful because they reveal how history is taught to North Koreans, providing a window into North Korean historiography. In North Korea, two types of history books exist—one devoted to the revolutionary histories and biographies of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Suk (the wife of Kim Il Sung and mother of Kim Jong Il), and a second kind devoted to the history of the entire Korean peninsula from antiquity to the present.⁵⁰ In both the revolutionary histories and biographies of the Great Leaders and the overall history of Korea, the emphasis is placed on telling the story that naturally leads to the conclusion of the North

⁴⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁰ History textbooks are further developed in Chapter 2.

Korean state and its leaders as the legitimate owners of Korean history. This is neither something new nor is it surprising for this is what many national histories are about—the selection and silencing of certain facts to justify and legitimate those with vested, ruling power.⁵¹ Yet this is mentioned because as one of the instruments used to legitimate the North Korean state and its leadership, history plays an important role in bringing to life the utopian vision of North Korean socialism that the state so fervently espouses.

Another highly important instrument for legitimating the North Korean state and its leaders is culture, which is tasked to reproduce the revolutionary history of North Korea into an ideologically consumable product for the mass public. From literature to films to art to revolutionary dramas to monuments, cultural production is vast, highly politicized, and directly under the control of the state. What stands out in North Korean cultural production is the pervasiveness of history. The cohesion of history and culture can be seen in numerous North Korean paintings and monuments and it is this connection that lies at the heart of this dissertation. While both history and culture are politicized, serving a political purpose to justify the North Korean state, revolution, and its leadership, how this is accomplished, how this process is made effective is what this dissertation seeks to examine.

To examine the narrative turn of the North Korean past into a renewed and reenergized revolutionary history that serves as the underpinnings of the North Korean state, this dissertation focuses on the dramatization of history, the key concept for this analysis. Through an examination of the visual narrative captured in North Korean art, specifically paintings and monuments, this dissertation seeks to develop an aspect of the narrative turn that is often overlooked, but in an image-based cultural context. History is mobilized in North Korean cultural production for the ideological transformation of the people. How history and culture

⁵¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

cohere can be understood through the dramatization of history. The creation of a new reality through the process of the dramatization of history is the vision of an ideal socialist utopian world advocated by the North Korean state. This new reality is given form in paintings and monuments, created through a process of filtering, where only the relevant is rescued and the irrelevant is cast off. In essence, this utopian world is a representation brought to life by the individual stories comprising the dominant, revolutionary narrative.

As an illusory ideal, the utopian vision in North Korea is far from the everyday realities of daily life. To put it frankly, the utopian socialist world that is represented in art simply does not exist. It is purely an imaginary abstraction, serving as a substitute for reality. This substitute for reality is desperately needed because it is the utopian vision that ultimately sustains the North Korean state and its leaders through the travails of the current times. While certainly there are other methods that are utilized to give form to the utopian vision, visualizing the vision is particularly important. It is through art that this imaginary world becomes visible and real. It is through art that the utopian vision is kept alive. The task of art is therefore to make the nonexistent, the invisible come into being to create an alternative reality to the present. This is why art is important for North Korea.

The historical narrative that is told in North Korean art is one of triumph against all odds, the intense struggles of heroic individuals, the unwavering loyalty and love for the homeland that is deeply seeped with revolutionary fervor. This narrative is the official, politically sanctioned revolutionary history that legitimates the North Korean state and its leaders. To make the utopian vision real, the vision is visualized in the form of paintings and monuments to parade before the eyes of the masses, saturating their everyday lives. Although the vision is illusory, it is as if seeing will lead to believing. With the utopian vision rendered real and tangible, the call

to revolution is seen and heard. Years earlier during the time of the Japanese colonization, a similar phenomenon transpired as Korean nationalists struggled to gain a sense of a distinctive self through representations, narratives, and rhetorical strategies.⁵² With the physical concept of the nation eradicated, nationalists turned to spiritual concepts, such as the national soul, national essence, and national character, and history, language, and religion to nurture a sense of self vis-à-vis foreign influences on the peninsula. These spiritual concepts provided a sense of nationhood even though the physicality of the nation was jeopardized.⁵³ At the same time, Korean collaborationist ideologues also utilized visual images for political purposes—the dissemination of the Japanese colonial state’s propaganda—to mobilize the Korean people to assist the Japanese war effort.⁵⁴ The act of resorting to spiritual concepts in the case of Korean nationalists, visual images for Korean collaborationist ideologues, and to visual images in North Korea highlights the critical role of representations and art played (and continues to play) in the politics of the time. Such an act outlines the concrete contours of abstract notions that contribute to emboldening and sustaining a state, although the rise of the Korean nation during the colonial period is another story, unfolded in a different context.

A teleological idea of history and destiny, a mythic historic destiny of North Korea permeates North Korean art, displaying strikingly similar characteristics with Western European history paintings. The dramatization of history is needed because it is the main mechanism that enables the proliferation of a powerful iconography to make the illusive utopian world real, but it is also needed because it emotionally ties the people to the North Korean state and its leaders. As the long tradition of history paintings and the arts attest to in their critical role as instruments

⁵² Andre Schmid, *Korea Between Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Michael Kim, “The Aesthetics of Total Mobilisation in the Visual Culture of Late Colonial Korea,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 3-4 (2007): 483-502.

for producing a nationalist iconography to re-envision the past, what is imperative to emphasize is that art is not necessarily a direct mimesis of reality. Instead, art outperforms and supersedes the present reality by creating a vision of a world that is happier, brighter, and richer. It is a world that is the exact opposite of the grinds of daily existence. By visually creating a better world that the people can emotionally connect to as a counterpoint, the drab present reality can be endured, sustaining the North Korean state further into the future.

The idea that a chance to emotionally capture a moment in human history is also an opportunity to secure one's own identity occupies the central foundation of North Korean art, an idea that correlates with the rise of history paintings in Western Europe to make the nation real. However, this idea is usually lost because socialist art, including North Korean art, is rarely separated from the propaganda associated with it. On the surface, ambiguity rarely permeates the images depicted in North Korean paintings. Instead, visions of unremitting valor, perseverance, and happiness dominate much of these paintings. As in most cultural production in North Korea, paintings, too, adhere to a strict code of regulations, conflating ideology and history to one overarching inner vision of the North Korean state. Themes are recycled, the perpetual smiling faces of North Korean leaders and citizens are ubiquitous, and each thematic painting tells a state-sanctioned narrative. Seen from a remove, the striking sameness, the repetitious thematic content, resists easy consumption for an individual outside the socialist state.

Finding the link between socialist art and Western European traditions of history paintings contributes to overcoming the divide between non-socialist and socialist art by redefining the contours of visual culture. In a redefined visual culture, what the act of seeing means is equally important as what is actually worthy of seeing in a given cultural context. This is the new visual culture that "redefines both what it is to see, and what there is to see" as spoken

by Bruno Latour.⁵⁵ While the study of visual culture as noted often struggles with the divide between “high” and “low” art, what type of art merits discussion and what does not, this is not necessarily the case within the study of socialist art. As Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich point out:

In the Soviet Union the pathos of creating a proletarian society in the 1920s manifested itself in the erosion of boundaries between high, applied, and popular arts. Moreover, all cultural objects were thought of as equally capable of carrying ideological values and, therefore, as suitable for propaganda. Subsequently, the experience of living in an environment thoroughly saturated with ideological significance has led Russian intellectuals and artists of the 1970s and 1980s to treat all manifestations of Soviet visual culture with equal attention—from cinema to design, from painting to propaganda banners.⁵⁶

The act of treating equally all manifestations of visual culture is also found in North Korean art, perhaps unsurprising considering the importance of Soviet influence on the development of North Korean cultural production particularly during the formative years of the state.⁵⁷ Although Kim Jong Il’s penchant for film is widely known, there is no denying the critical importance of all forms of various cultural mediums to establish the legitimacy of the North Korean state and

⁵⁵ Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands,” *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* 6 (1986): 10.

⁵⁶ Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich, “Object, Space, Culture: Introduction,” in *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*, ed. and trans. by Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), xxiii-xxiv.

⁵⁷ Soviet influence extended far beyond culture during the early years of the North Korean state. As argued by Andrei Lankov, the foundation of the North Korean state stemmed from the Stalinist political and social system. See Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea 1945-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

its leaders.⁵⁸ The tendency to view cultural objects or different types of art from a hierarchical perspective precludes new insights on how a totalitarian regime such as North Korea manages to remain relevant through time despite tremendous pressures and fissures within its society.

Despite the tendency to relegate North Korean art as merely propaganda empty of meaning, the stakes involved in North Korean cultural production are far more complex. North Korean art operates under a control system, where the aspect of the free artist is absent and the contours of what defines art are established from the top. The past and culture are owned and monopolized by the state. This is what totalitarianism is about. In North Korea, art is not defined by aesthetic pleasure. Instead, functionality equates aesthetic pleasure. Thus, how North Korean art works with history, a constituent of an ambitious control system that fulfills a revolutionary project, offers an opportunity to decipher the strategies and mechanisms at work in the ideological mobilization of society.

As part of a larger political apparatus, North Korean cultural production hews closely to how Susan Buck-Morss characterizes the nature of socialist culture: art and technology, fantasy and function, meaningful symbol and useful tool.⁵⁹ North Korean art goes hand in hand with politics and as Buck-Morss describes the relationship between art and politics, “it is not the content of the work, but its effects on the institution within which the work functions that determines the political effects” of the art.⁶⁰ In North Korean art, the content of an artwork *is* important as the analysis on the dramatization of history will show. However, Buck-Morss’ idea is relevant because the effects an artwork has on the North Korean state—the institution that Buck-Morss speaks of—are North Korea’s greatest political strength. That is, art, as a part of a

⁵⁸ For a study on North Korean film see Lee Myōngja, *Pukhan yōnghwasa* (Seoul: Communication Books, Inc., 2007) and Chōn Yōngsōn, *Pukhan yōnghwa sok- ūi salm iyagi* (Seoul: Kūllurim, 2006).

⁵⁹ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 125-126.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

larger system of cultural production, sustains the North Korean state. Artworks are the omnipresent visual memes that map the emotional and existential contours of a utopian socialist reality. The utopian vision of the North Korean state is kept viable through art. This is art's greatest political strength. In this respect, North Korean art does not work in other institutions outside of its own. It does not work for those of us outside a totalitarian state because we do not and cannot relate to it.

The blueprint for cultural production during the early years of the North Korean state formation largely derived from Stalinist culture, especially the adoption of socialist realism. This borrowing was later North Koreanized with the coinage of Juche (chuch'e) ideology and the cult of personality, all infused with elements of traditional Confucian Korean culture.⁶¹ A massive ideological transformation of the people based on socialism transpired with the establishment of the DPRK. As in other former socialist countries, North Korea recognized the potency of culture to mobilize the masses and politicized culture to realize the socialist transformation of the people centered on the revolutionary history of Kim Il Sung. In the Soviet Union, the official genealogy of the October Revolution was revised during the 1920s from a Euro-centric purview to a Russo-centric sense of identity by attributing the Russian peasant revolts of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries as the origins of the Revolution.⁶² As a result of this shift, cultural production focused on creating enduring icons with a vivid and uplifting sense of revolutionary history that would be passed down to posterity.⁶³ North Korean cultural production operated in a similar mode, where art functioned under a prescribed context, fulfilling a specific purpose rather than serving as a purely aesthetic object.⁶⁴ Art also served as the

⁶¹ Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 4.

⁶² Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 188-189.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁴ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 7, 12, 15.

optimal medium to realize Juche ideology since art, according to Kim Jong Il, best fits the people's emotions and serves the revolutionary causes of the North Korean state.⁶⁵ Through the process of mobilizing history in culture, culture became twinned with politics and history became an important tool for culture.

The twinning of politics and culture was evident during the 1980s when the ideological mobilization of society through the use of culture was in full swing as Kim Jong Il was publicly appointed as the successor of Kim Il Sung. In response to the changing political climate and the potential dangers that accompany a transition of power, emphasis on culture became paramount. According to the “symbolic-ideological” means of social control that Katherine Verdery has studied, socialist states rely on ideology to garner and concentrate power because these states are inherently weak despite their semblance of control and strength.⁶⁶ Using this argument, Charles Armstrong argues that an inverse relationship exists between economic performance and the intensity of ideological rhetoric.⁶⁷ In other words, emphasis on ideology increased as the economy weakened in North Korea. From the mid-1970s onwards as the North Korean economy deteriorated, Juche ideology reached the zenith of its totalizing dominance while “socialism of our style” became a common slogan during the 1990s with the onslaught of the paralyzing famines and ensuing economic crisis.⁶⁸ “Socialism of our style” combined elements of indigenous Korean culture with Marxist-Leninism to become Juche socialism.⁶⁹

With the weakening economic factor, domestic political shifts generated by the official emergence of Kim Jong Il, and growing geopolitical uncertainties, emphasis on propaganda grew.

⁶⁵ Kim Chŏngil, *Misullon* (Pyŏngyang: Chosŏn nodongdang ch'ulp'ansa 1992), 1.

⁶⁶ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 86.

⁶⁷ Charles K. Armstrong, “A Socialism of Our Style: North Korean Ideology in a Post-Communist Era,” in *North Korean Foreign Relations in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Samuel S. Kim (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 169.

The strengthening of ideology through culture was determined by Kim Jong Il as the most effective means to securing his transition to power.⁷⁰ Cultural policies during this time, as announced in *Munhak Shinmun*, a newspaper devoted to culture and a mouthpiece for the North Korean state, reflected this fervent emphasis on ideology. Articles in the *Munhak Shinmun* articulated cultural policies set forth by the state, ranging from the deification of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il to the solidification of peasants' morale in the countryside particularly during the 1990s in the wake of the economic crisis.⁷¹ These articles and editorials replete with propaganda sought to rally the populace in response to the growing internal and external crises by intensifying the call for revolution.

The intensification of ideology in politically and economically delicate times aims to safeguard the state from potential collapse. Quoting Walter Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss argues that when an era crumbles, "History breaks down into images, not into stories."⁷² In reference to the end of the Soviet era and its global reverberations, Buck-Morss further argues that the continuous flow of narration is broken as an era comes to a close. In turn, past experiences that have been jettisoned from the dominant narrative are rescued through images of the past, which according to Buck-Morss, are a combination of memory and desire. With the rupture of the dominant narrative, historical particulars may be free to embody multilayered meanings, challenging the present times and norms.⁷³ The unraveling of the dominant narrative is exactly what North Korea wants to prevent. In the case of North Korea, the continuous flow of narration remains firmly intact, dominating how past experiences are reinterpreted, reconstructed, and

⁷⁰ Chŏng Ch'ŏrhyŏn, *Pukha- ŭi munhwa chŏngch'aek* (Seoul: Sŏul Kyŏngje kyŏngyŏng, 2008), 201.

⁷¹ *Munhak Shimun* was first published on December 6, 1956. It is an official organ of the Chosŏnjakka tongmaeng, which is the official state organization for North Korean writers. Established on March 25, 1946, the organization is responsible for disseminating socialist realist and Juche literature.

⁷² Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 68. The quote is referenced as Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5: *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), 596.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

recast. While history does not break down into images that rescue certain past experiences, images that buttress the dominant narrative prevail in most North Korean cultural production through the dramatization of history. In totalitarian states, this is a process that is intensified in times of peril because the states do not want the people to critically reflect.

Within this context, historical representations depicted in North Korean art serve a specific purpose. The grand, overarching narrative that legitimates the North Korean state is comprised of the representations that are captured in paintings and monuments. As Frank Ankersmit argues, “the vocabulary of representation has the capacity to account not only for the details of the past but also for the way these details have been integrated within the totality of the historical narrative.”⁷⁴ As such, representation is indifferent to meaning and it is the scripter of the narrative who gives historical representation, or reality, meaning. The images in North Korean art are essentially the “narrative substance,” which, according to Ankersmit is the predetermined set of statements that as a whole coalesce to exemplify the master historical narrative’s representation of the past.⁷⁵ What is at odds in historical representation is the narrative substance, or idealism, vis-à-vis the concept of reality, or realism.⁷⁶ North Korean art embodies this duality—the representation of the past as an idealized reality in opposition to the depressed conditions of everyday reality.

With the grand project of transforming the masses into exemplary socialist citizens, the North Korean state relied on the arts through socialist realism to translate reality into a *socialist* reality. What resulted was a production of visual symbols, a visual text that served as substitutes for reality. In the world of North Korean socialism, the arts were a political-aesthetic project that filled and perpetuated the landscape with idealized images of reality that justified socialism as

⁷⁴ Frank Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 209.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

the natural outcome of Korean history. In this process of creating socialism through socialist realist art, reality, ironically, became far removed from the everyday existence of the masses, reinforcing the “de-realizing of reality.”⁷⁷ Reality as envisioned and presented was far removed from what was actually real; rather, it was an amalgamation of ideals and dreams that bolstered socialism. Reality in its factual form ceased to exist, no longer relevant. As Dobrenko describes this process in the Soviet context, “the more socialism realized itself, the more life was de-realized. The mechanism for realizing socialism and simultaneously de-realizing life was what we call Socialist Realism.”⁷⁸ The reality that was presented was the only genuine reality and therefore the only reality articulated. Other potential realities were silenced and voiceless, unable to carve out a space in the dominant historical narrative. What can be inferred from this analysis is that the realism in socialist realism is not about a factual replication, but something else, something far removed from facts.

Rather than aesthetic value, emotional impact is one of the defining motives in North Korean art. And, it is the viewer who is meant to absorb the full force of the emotional impact. The fundamental basis of North Korean culture rests in the unwavering belief that humans are essentially malleable and capable of being changed, objects to be molded and shaped through ideas and indoctrination. At the core, socialist realist art in North Korea focuses on the molding of a viewer to satisfy the most fundamental need of the North Korean state—materializing the socialist transformation of the masses.

The North Korean state and its socialist revolution are sustained by an aestheticized politics. Aesthetics and politics are so closely intertwined that the North Korean state could not possibly remain relevant all these years without the aesthetics. By visually materializing the

⁷⁷ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist realism*, 19.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

utopian socialist vision, art pervades the everyday. The connection between the aesthetics and the everyday is an illuminating one and it is this connection that invests art with one of its powers. In North Korea, art achieves its goal as a political instrument by inundating the everyday lives of the people with an emotional visual reminder of the utopian socialist vision. The recurring motifs and themes used to create such a vision in visual representations are nothing short of the ordinary and mundane. The history that is captured is also nothing extraordinary. Yet art turns the ordinary and mundane into the sublime through the dramatization of history. The ordinary and mundane are presented in a new light, given a different form, full of possibilities and more. The bleak, dark reality of everyday life is given an added boost, a cosmetic uplift by aestheticizing reality to create a new, more beautiful, inspirational, and moving world.

Through the dramatization of history, the utopian vision is brought to life by overwhelming emotions, truthfulness as a totalizing moral history, the reduction of the multifaceted voices that comprise a social experience to create a monumental history, and the personality cult of heroes and heroines. Through the various stories captured in paintings and monuments, a sense of continuity is created, a teleological progression on a predetermined path set forth by the North Korean state, marching toward the utopian socialist world where only perpetual happiness and abundance reign. Through the dramatization of history, it is the powerful addition of emotion to the teleological history by emotionally conveying a historical fact, emotionally glorifying heroes and their gallant deeds that the utopian vision is made convincing, overpowering, and, therefore, real in a tableaux spread across the North Korean landscape.

In the remaining five chapters, I narrate how the utopian socialist vision is visually brought to life in art through the dramatization of history by dividing the chapters into the themes of art, emotion, truthfulness, monumentality, and the personality cult. The first chapter addresses why art is so important for North Korea and how art is mobilized. It begins by highlighting how history stands out in art. Next, the following topics are examined: from art to revolutionary art; the meaning of art in North Korea; socialist realism as a mechanism in North Korean art; and how paintings relate to history through a discussion on history paintings. The second chapter highlights how art provokes emotions, yet how emotions are circumscribed in North Korean art. It focuses on the Korean words *kamjǒng* and *chǒngsǒ*, commonly translated as emotion in English, and the way these words are used in North Korean art writings—ideological emotion (*sasang kamjǒng*) and aesthetic sensitivity (*yesuljǒk chǒngsǒ*) and what these two words reveal about the use of emotion in paintings. The third chapter examines the idea of truthfulness by analyzing the distinction between the Korean words *sasil* and *chinsil*, translated as fact and true in English, in North Korean materials on art and what the realism in socialist realism means for North Korea. This chapter looks at the transformation from a historical fact to aesthetic truthfulness in paintings. The fourth chapter focuses on the idea of monumentality by analyzing how monuments use public space to write history, how monuments create a space for emotional engagement, and how monuments are aestheticized in paintings and posters. The final chapter examines the personality cult of Kim Il Sung. It analyzes how Kim Il Sung occupies the center, the importance of a sense of rapport in a painting, and the making of a Kim Il Sung-centered utopia.