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Title: Aestheticized politics : the workings of North Korean art

Issue Date: 2014-03-18

Chapter 5: Reducing History into the Personality Cult

A charismatic, powerful leader thrives in times of crisis. From the initial years of the North Korean state when the socialist nation-building project dominated the national landscape to the advent of Kim Jong Il on the political scene signaling a dynastic power transition, a sense of perpetual crisis gripped North Korea, creating a fertile ground for the emergence and, more importantly, the need for a magnetic, larger than life leader. A leader of monumental proportions—from a revolutionary biography, to brilliant leadership, to magnanimous giver of love—was spun in the form of a personality cult visually construed in art. At once heroic and fantastic, the glorified story rendered in art of an individual's triumphs in the face of adversity culminating as the eternal caretaker of a nation is a portraiture of the revolutionary history of North Korea under the leadership of Kim Il Sung.

In the hierarchy of North Korean art production, paintings of the Great Leaders are placed at the pinnacle, a task privileged to those artists at the acme of their career.¹ In *The Treatise of Art*, Kim Jong Il delineates the ideological thematic ranking of theme paintings (*chujehwa*) in the following descending order: the greatness of the Workers' Party and the Great Leader; the revolutionary heritage of Korea; scenes of the fatherland; the reunification of the fatherland; the everyday life of laborers; scenes strengthening class education and the Korean War; and the military and the lives of soldiers.² In many occasions, paintings of the Great Leader are contextualized with other themes from the ideological thematic ranking. For instance, a painting may feature the Great Leader within the context of the Korean War, or among laborers

¹ Some of the most prominent artists in North Korea are/were the painters of the official portraits of Kim Il Sung. Many of them achieved the highest title of People's Artist by painting images of Kim Il Sung. Some of these artists include Kim Sŏngmin, Kim Sŏnghŭi, Kim Ch'anggil, Chŏng Ch'angmo, Chŏng Gwanch'ŏl, and Ryu Hwan'gi.

² Kim Chŏngil, *Misullon* (P'yŏngyang: Chosŏn rodongdang ch'ulp'ansa, 1992), 44-47.

during the reconstruction period post-Korean War, or surrounded by guerrilla soldiers during the Japanese colonial period. As indicative of the preeminent position enjoyed by Kim Il Sung, the secondary themes, though highly important, are an auxiliary, serving primarily to augment Kim Il Sung's personality cult.

The centrality of a supreme leader (*suryŏng*) in North Korea can be traced to the lasting impact of indigenous traditions and legacies of Confucianism on Korean culture from the Chosŏn period. As Charles Armstrong notes, the “humanistic idealism of Korean Confucian thought” manifested as reverence for family, the leader, and social distinction was passed down and modified in North Korea.³ In this cultural and societal schema where rigid relations between sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife, old and young prevail, Kim Il Sung developed into the sovereign, father, the supreme leader par excellence all in one, an image perpetuated relentlessly through a powerful personality cult that encompassed the entire family of the Great Leader. With the rise of a single individual as the supreme leader, the political, moral, societal, and cultural center of North Korea pivoted around Kim Il Sung.

Building from the indigenous elements of Confucianism, the personality cult of Kim Il Sung borrowed heavily from other prominent personality cults of the twentieth-century. Perhaps the strongest and most obvious influence came from Stalinism; however, remnants of Japanese emperor worship and Christianity also contributed to the Kim Il Sung personality cult.⁴ As further observed by Armstrong, the image of the sun, which was a symbol for the Japanese emperor, was transposed into a metaphor for Kim Il Sung and Christian imagery was used to describe the Great Leader.⁵ In addition, the “mystical ideas of Confucianism” as observed by East Germans in an embassy report—filial piety, moral leadership, aura of traditional Korean

³ Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 6.

⁴ Ibid., 223-224.

⁵ Ibid.

kingship, and traditional Korean shamanism—also characterized the personality cult of Kim Il Sung.⁶ All of these influences coalesced to reinforce Kim Il Sung as the centripetal force from which literally everything emanated. Kim Il Sung as the center, then, becomes intricately tied to the idea of monumentality, and thus, the dramatization of history. Through the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, the complexity of history is reduced to a single individual, a single narrative, and a single future. A monumental narrative centered on a monumental individual resembling a heroic, fantastical tale is the essence of Kim Il Sung's personality cult.

Images of the Immortal

A picture book titled *Images of the Immortal* featuring a collection of paintings on the personality cult of Kim Il Sung elucidates the dramatization of history in North Korean cultural production, disclosing how Kim Il Sung is interwoven in national history.⁷ Kim Il Sung and national history are indistinguishable, highlighting how history is mobilized to legitimize the North Korean state controlled by the ruling Kim family. What is striking about the picture book is twofold: the categorization of all periods of Kim Il Sung's life in relation to the history of North Korea and the absence of the artists who have painted the images of Kim Il Sung. The picture book speaks for itself—it is about linking the origins and development of the North Korean state to the life of Kim Il Sung. *Images of the Immortal* compartmentalizes Kim Il Sung's life into ten chapters and contains a group of paintings of Kim Il Sung appropriate for each chapter. The titles of the ten chapters are embellished with an explanatory quote from either Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, which are as follows:

⁶ Charles K. Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950-1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 135.

⁷ *Pulmyŏr-ŭi yŏngsang* (P'yŏngyang: Munye ch'ulp'ansa, 1992).

1. Glory of the nation: The Great Leader is the first leader our people received and served throughout thousands of years of history (Kim Jong Il).
2. The sun of juche soaring above Man'gyŏngdae: I saw numerous times the beastly brutalities of the Japanese and the miserable circumstances of our people suffering under the Japanese colonial rule at Man'gyŏngdae, the place where I was born and grew up, and places in and outside our country where my father settled and worked (Kim Il Sung).
3. The anchor of revolution has risen: Since the age of 15, I started a revolutionary struggle by organizing an underground revolutionary group. I mobilized youth into the organization and armed them with the ideology of revolution. I went to the countryside and established schools and night schools and educated the people (Kim Il Sung).
4. Plowing through the blizzard of Paektu: The struggle against the Japanese was an extremely difficult struggle that arose from neither a systemized national support nor a regular military and resisted the Japanese robbers who were armed down to their toenails (Kim Il Sung).
5. Under an extraordinary democracy: With the liberation of our fatherland, the almost half century of Japanese colonial rule ended and the great feat of the liberation of the people was realized and the wide road toward a new construction of Korea was opened (Kim Il Sung).
6. Cheers of victory: During the three years that our Party resisted the military invasion of American imperialists and their agents, our Party led the war for the liberation of the fatherland to victory and honorably protected the dignity of the people and the revolutionary trophies of war (Kim Il Sung).
7. Holding the grand blueprint: Although the American imperialists boasted that Korea would not be able to rise up again even if it took 100 years, our country was able to completely heal the wound from the war in several years and rise to become a powerful socialist nation in a short time span of less than 20 years after the war (Kim Il Sung).

8. Please summon the Ch'ŏllima from the legends: The enactment of the Ch'ŏllima movement has brought about an innovation in all aspects of our culture, ideology, and morals and we have achieved a bright result in our country's socialist nation building (Kim Il Sung).
9. Flying high the red banner of the three revolutions: The three revolutions of ideology, technology, and culture are the total policies for the construction of socialism and communism and the fundamental means for realizing the socialist transformation of society (Kim Il Sung).
10. A unified fatherland for the future generations: We cannot leave the task of unification of the fatherland to the future generations. We must unify our fatherland in our generation (Kim Il Sung).⁸

Beginning with a group of paintings celebrating Kim Il Sung, the picture book limns the history of North Korea by chronologically tracing the life of the Great Leader. Every major event from the Japanese colonial period through the Korean War to the post-war reconstruction years and the hopes of unification is positioned from a Kim Il Sung-centered perspective while the historical narrative imparted is one that blurs the boundary between illusion and reality.

Occupying the Center

While the revolutionary biography of Kim Il Sung may be learned through history textbooks, the personality cult of the Great Leader becomes form through visual representations. Elevating Kim Il Sung to the center entails translating the revolutionary biography of the Great Leader into pictorial representations through the use of visual strategies laid out in North Korean art theoretical writings. A scrutiny of the Kim Il Sung personality cult paintings reveals the

⁸ Ibid.

distinctions that differentiate the Great Leader from others through his placement in the painting, the color of his attire, his size, props either placed in his hands or in his close proximity, his body movement, and his gaze. Props, such as, a script, pen, maps, blueprints, farming tools, vegetables, and fruits are often the everyday objects that help convey the glorification of the Great Leader while simultaneously contributing to his apartness from others featured in the paintings. Kim Il Sung's gaze is also in many instances directed outside and beyond the painting while the gaze of others are focused on the Great Leader. Gazing beyond is synonymous with looking into the future, seeing utopia. This act of gazing outside the painting is also found in images of Stalin, which functioned as a "time-tested" visual strategy, according to Jan Plamper, where the beyond equated the future utopia.⁹ Not only is Kim Il Sung gazing out into utopia, but in his appearance, he glows, he has an aura. The Great Leader is utopia. Utopia is luminous, the center of light, suggestive of the figure of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi that always faced the sun on top of the now demolished Arch of Neutrality in Turkmenistan.¹⁰

The body movement of Kim Il Sung in paintings, or his constant motionlessness, merits special attention. Kim Il Sung's motionlessness is all the more noticeable for its juxtaposition to the bodily movement of other characters surrounding him. The "monumental, motionless, and vertical" depiction of Stalin in Soviet art and films as described by Katerina Clark directly translates to the depiction of Kim Il Sung in North Korean art and monuments.¹¹ Modeled to resemble a monument, the depiction of Kim Il Sung as static reinforces the applicability of Clark's analysis of Stalin as in a state of *being* as opposed to Lenin in a state of *becoming* to

⁹ Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 38-39.

¹⁰ Jan Šír, "Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 25 (2008): 205. Due to a technical mechanism, the figure of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi was continuously rotated over the course of 24 hours.

¹¹ Katerina Clark, "Socialist realism and the Sacralizing of Space," in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 12.

describe the depiction of the Great Leader.¹² In his state of motionlessness, Kim Il Sung does not react to anyone or anything. Rather, the others surrounding him always react to him. The lack of variety in the depiction of Kim Il Sung, also found in monuments of the Great Leader, parallels the visual images of Stalin as motionless vis-à-vis the state of movement of others. In Soviet paintings, just as Stalin was described as “calm” and “confident,”¹³ Kim Il Sung, too, oozed an impenetrable calmness and confidence heightened by his motionlessness irrespective of the actions that may be unfolding around him.

The motionless, erect, and monumental depiction of Kim Il Sung is enhanced by visually creating a center in the form of concentric circles. In paintings that feature Kim Il Sung with groups of people, a dominant trope is the use of circles formed around the Great Leader. Highly reminiscent of the concentric circles found in the spatial arrangements in images of Stalin, Kim Il Sung is also placed in the center in paintings.¹⁴ Though a circle may indicate a sense of inclusiveness akin to a collective whole, the circle formed around Kim Il Sung in actuality produces the opposite effect by further accentuating the distinction of the Great Leader from others. Instead of a sense of togetherness, a bifurcation is formed in the act of establishing Kim Il Sung as the veritable leader and father-figure for all the people. By placing Kim Il Sung next to or in close proximity to other characters who are responding to him, the motionless Kim Il Sung is elevated to an untouchable status. In effect, it is the reaction of other characters to Kim Il Sung that invests the Great Leader with a sense of awe-inspiring monumentality.

¹² Ibid., 12-13. Clark keenly discriminates the depictions of Stalin and Lenin in Soviet art and film. According to Clark, the depiction of Lenin is closer to that of ordinary citizens because Lenin is most commonly depicted as a mass or a smaller group in motion or activity. In contrast, Stalin is depicted as a solo act, monumental and motionless (Ibid).

¹³ Jan Plamper, “The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult: Circles around Stalin,” in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19-50.

Centering, the erect motionlessness of Kim Il Sung, and the fictionalized revolutionary biography of Kim Il Sung in the form of truthfulness cohere to produce visual snapshots of the revolutionary history of North Korea. These three elements are keenly illustrated in the painting *On the Day of the Performance of the Revolutionary Drama <The Three Pretenders>* (figure 1) informed by the painting's review from the *Chosŏn Misul Nyŏn'gam*. As indicated by the title, the revolutionary drama plays a pivotal role in understanding the mechanisms of the painting. According to official North Korean writings, *The Three Pretenders* is a satirical revolutionary drama written by Kim Il Sung during the early years of his anti-Japanese guerrilla activities. It tells the story of the demise of a fictitious country called Sondoguk due to the power struggle and factional strife among three ministers, all eyeing the king's position after his death. A descriptive summary of the drama appears in the North Korean encyclopedia, *Chosŏn Tae Paekkwa Sajŏn*:

Through the satirical depiction of three ministers, including the simple and dim-witted Minister Pak, the two-faced and gangly Minister Mun who is good at cooking up plots, and the rat-like Minister Ch'oe who constantly preys on the weaknesses of others while always changing sides and pursuing his interest, all disloyal subject fighting like cats and dogs and disguising themselves as faithful subjects in order to strengthen their own political faction, the revolutionary drama convincingly teaches the consequences of inflicting factional strife on the history of our nation's struggle for liberation.¹⁵

Kim Jong Il describes the lessons of the dialogue in the drama in a similar tone:

¹⁵ Chosŏn Tae Paekkwa Sajŏn vol. XIII (P'yŏngyang: Paekkwa sajŏn ch'ulpan'sa, 2000), 454.

At a time when the king has deceased and a foreign invasion is drawing near, instead of discussing the countermeasures to resolve the crisis and rescue the country from disaster, the three ministers are fighting for the king's position, insisting that they (as opposed to others) are the most loyal subjects by slandering each other. This dialogue reveals in detail how the leaders' eyes became blinded by the temptation of power and the true colors of the factions. It also profoundly and philosophically reveals the historical truth (*yŏksa ŭi chilli*) that factional strife is the rumination of a country.¹⁶

The inspiration for writing the *Three Pretenders* is ascribed to Kim Il Sung's opposition to the excessive factional strife and divide between the nationalists and communists during the time of Kim's anti-Japanese guerrilla activities. It is against this political backdrop that the storyline of the *Three Pretenders* is produced.

Revolutionary dramas are a major component of North Korean cultural production and they first appeared during the late 1970s as part of the personality cult of Kim Il Sung. There are five official revolutionary dramas and all of them are propagated by the state as the "immortal, classic masterpieces written personally by Kim Il Sung" during the anti-Japanese guerrilla period. Kim Jong Il describes why they are so integral to North Korean cultural production:

The reason why the literary works created by the Great Leader are considered immortal classics is because they brightly realize the great Juche ideology, socialism, and Juche literary ideology that reveal the correct path toward the construction of a communist literary arts field, and

¹⁶ Kim Chŏngil, "Yŏn'gŭk yesur-e taehayŏ: munhak yesul pumun ilgundŭl-gwa han tamhwa, 1988.4.20," *Chosŏn chungang nyŏn'gam* (P'yŏngyang: Chosŏn chungang t'ongsinsa, 1989), 86, 99.

all thee occupy the highest and brightest place in humanity's history of thought.¹⁷

Kim Jong Il speaks extensively about revolutionary dramas in a 1988 conversation with workers from the Artists' Federation and claims that Kim Il Sung personally wrote the revolutionary dramas during the early years of his guerrilla activities. Kim Jong Il further observes that revolutionary dramas were staged and performed widely during the guerrilla years. Kim also talks about the importance of a new form of theater that embodies the ideas of Juche while jettisoning the antiquated ways of theater production of the past. In this conversation, Kim Jong Il states that this new form of theater must “not only completely realize the human demands of Juche in content and form, but also rely on Juche's creative principles in the areas of creative production and method.”¹⁸ With this discussion in mind, the painting *On the Day of the Performance of the Revolutionary Drama <The Three Pretenders>* was created in 1985 with a review published in the 1986 edition of *Chosŏn Misul Nyŏn'gam*, followed by a revival of the *The Three Pretenders* as a new form of theatrical production in 1987.

Reviews of paintings are useful because they reveal how they contribute to art's role as an ideological instrument. They usually begin with the historical context of the scene being depicted in the paintings and place this context within the broader theoretical framework set forth by Kim Jong Il. The importance of capturing an appropriate moment in artworks is emphasized, which is the essence of how reviews work. A moment should be evocative, yet needs to be unwrapped by the reviews. Reviews unwrap the story behind the painting and fill the potential gaps in understanding and directly steer the interpretation of the viewer, guiding the viewer to emotionally internalize historical truth. How the reviews work ties with what the paintings are

¹⁷ *Chosŏn Tae Paekkwa Sajŏn* vol. XIII, 14.

¹⁸ Kim Chŏngil, “Yŏn'gŭk yesure taehayŏ,” 1-2.

about—to capture a moment that encapsulates in a convincing way the essence of a specific episode and time.



Fig. 1: On the Day of the Performance of the Revolutionary Drama <The Three Pretenders>, Kim Sŏngmin, Chosŏnhwa, 1985

The inclusiveness of a circle centered on Kim Il Sung yet the apartness of the Great Leader from the crowd can be gathered from the beginning of the painting's review. The review introduces the theoretical framework to discuss the painting before moving to a description of the historical context in which the *The Three Pretenders* was created. Quoting Kim Il Sung, the review states that “we have been awakened by Juche ideology, which has been strengthened through our struggle for revolution and nation-building and that the owners of and the impetus for revolution and nation-building are the people.”¹⁹ The review, then, describes that while Korea's liberation from Japan was everyone's desire, the factional and power struggle between the communists and nationalists precluded the people rising up and partaking in the

¹⁹ Hong Ŭichŏng, “Chosŏn hyŏngmyŏng-ŭl inmin taejung-ŭi wiŏb-ero chŏnhwan shik'in widaehan yŏngsang: chosŏnhwa <hyŏngmyŏng yŏn'gŭk [3 in 1 tang] kongyŏn-ŭi nar-e> (Kim Sŏngmin chak)-e taehayŏ,” *Chosŏn Misul Nyŏn'gam*, ed. by Nam Minu, Kim Myŏngwŏn, Chŏng Wŏnyong, and Han Wŏn'gŭn (P'yŏngyang: Munye ch'ulp'ansa, 1986), 470.

revolutionary struggle for liberation. It was Kim Il Sung, according to the review, who revealed that neither revolution nor liberation could be achieved by the methods of the nationalists and communists and that the rightful owners of revolution were the people. It adds that the Great Leader “founded and realized the immortal Juche ideology and by gloriously leading the people toward the struggle for revolution, the revolution became a feat of the people and he was also able to achieve the liberation of Korea.”²⁰ The description of Kim Il Sung as one with the people yet distinguished from the rest due to his leadership and wisdom reinforces the inclusive but apart mechanism of the circle. Further stressing the distinctiveness of the Great Leader, the review provides a brief synopsis of the *The Three Pretenders*; however, it places a greater emphasis on Kim Il Sung’s revolutionary accomplishments. The painting is extolled for giving form to the “immortal image of the Great Leader directing the revolutionary drama he personally wrote, disclosing the immense damage inflicted on the struggle for liberation and communism by the nationalists.”²¹

The remaining portion of the review is devoted to explicating the strategies and techniques utilized in the painting, written in highly descriptive language. First mentioning the central position of Kim Il Sung in the painting, the review describes Kim’s appearance and what the painting reveals:

Neatly dressed in middle-school attire, holding the rolled up script of the drama in his hands, the image of the Great Leader looking toward the stage is bright and filled with foresight. The painting reveals through the portrayal of the Great Leader the historical truth (*yŏksajŏk sasil*) that he (Great Leader) created and personally directed the revolutionary drama

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

The Three Pretenders and that he feels throughout his entire body the excitement of the masses.²²

What is revealing about this passage is how paintings define historical truth. Historical truth is conveyed not simply by showing an event, rather by illuminating emotions that are true. Art does not necessarily reveal factual truth, but emotional truth that provides instant awareness and insight, foregrounding how art imitates life. Simply through the depiction of an event one makes the image historically true.

This passage also reveals the historical truth that Kim Il Sung both wrote and directed the revolutionary drama as a middle school student. In fact, this is highly doubtful. Historical representation is indifferent to meaning in the factual sense; rather the North Korean state gives historical representation meaning, or a sense of reality. Here, one sees how the statement of Kim Il Sung's authorship and directorship of the revolutionary drama acts as the "narrative substance" that F.R. Ankersmit speaks of, underscoring the tension between the narrative substance's idealism and reality.²³ To overcome this tension, what is pivotal is representation. The narrative substance must be integrated into a specific representation of the past through the dramatization of history. Once the narrative substance is integrated, as echoed by John Lewis Gaddis, fitting representations to reality gives a version of the past truthfulness.²⁴

The description of the reactions of various characters to Kim Il Sung occupies a significant portion of the review. These reactions contribute to revealing the interaction between Kim Il Sung and the crowd—the motionlessness of the Great Leader while the crowd reacts to him. In describing the crowd's reactions, the review begins by highlighting the physical

²² Ibid.

²³ Frank Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 219, 224.

²⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5, 7, 34.

descriptions of several characters in the painting. Of particular note is the attention placed on the social status of the characters by emphasizing the characters' diverse backgrounds. The descriptions of several key characters are as follows:

The depiction of the communist adolescent standing next to the Great Leader, the head of the village, and the elderly man and a young man sitting in front of the Great Leader is particularly impressive and these individuals play an important role in revealing the painting's ideological content. In the center of the painting an elderly, white-haired man with a healthy appearance is depicted. Although his hands appear rough and he seems tough, we can tell that he is the head of the village by his unusually gentle demeanor and his attire—he is wearing a vest over his summer jacket and traditional Korean socks—revealing his standard of living and education. Through the depiction of the elderly man who is gesturing about the drama, hitting the knee of the man sitting next to him, and laughing broadly, the painting shows the overflowing energy of the scene and the great influence of the revolutionary drama the *The Three Pretenders*.²⁵

The revolutionary drama is weaved into the painting by serving as an emblem for the greatness of Kim Il Sung. Reaction to the Great Leader is not only physical, but also and more importantly, emotional and mental. It is by witnessing the revolutionary drama unfolding on the stage, feeling at heart the lessons of the revolutionary drama that instigates the reactions of the characters. The gazes and reactions of many characters are directed toward the stage or elsewhere, away from Kim Il Sung, yet the detailed descriptions of the characters function to

²⁵ Hong Ŭichōng, “Chosŏn hyōngmyōng-ŭl inmin taejung-ŭi wiōb-ero chōnhwan shik’in widaehan yōngsang: chosŏnhwa <hyōngmyōng yōn’gŭk [3 in 1 tang] kongyōn-ŭi nar-e> (Kim Sōngmin chak)-e taehayō,” 470-471.

show how the emotional, inner awakening of the characters brought forth by the revolutionary drama is a reaction to the Great Leader:

There is a depiction of an elderly man and a robust young man seated in front of the Great Leader. Both are giving hard stares at the nationalists and their character depictions are individualistic. The elderly man's face is covered with a critical expression telling the nationalists, who are no longer young, to wake up and regain their senses while the young man's expression is filled with anger at the nationalists' rash behavior. The painting depicts the gradual awakening of the masses to the evil intentions of the nationalists through the revolutionary drama. Particularly, the depiction of the elderly man standing next to the Great Leader reveals many things. Neatly dressed in a traditional Korean overcoat and with a handsome black beard and eyes softly lowered, there is deep emotion on his facial expression. Such a depiction indicates that he has a firm purpose. Possessing a clean conscience, he joined the nationalists to help the liberation movement and was always on the move following the nationalists. Reflecting now on how futile the just life he sought to live in the past was, he believes that for the first time a splendid stroke of luck has sprouted upon the Korean people as he serves the Great Leader. The painting vividly shows this inner world of the elderly man.²⁶

The striking element of these passages is the detailed character descriptions, including facial expressions and a character's inner world. In *The Treatise of Art*, Kim Jong Il speaks at length about the importance of capturing the inner world of a character and the significant role facial

²⁶ Ibid., 471.

descriptions play in character portrayals.²⁷ It can be surmised from a passage in *The Treatise of Art* that character portrayals serve to heighten the truthfulness in art:

An artwork's value and educational meaning for humans are influenced by how a character's personality is depicted in an art creation... In order to prominently depict personality in a character description, the inner world of an individual must be captured deeply... the inner world serves as the basis for personality depiction. The inner world is the spiritual manifestation of the cohesion between an individual's thoughts, will, and emotion.²⁸

According to Kim, the most important element in depicting an individual's inner world rests in capturing the "psychological movement that occurs as an individual sees and interacts with reality... and in this process revealing an individual's thoughts and ideas in the truest form."²⁹

Kim Jong Il enumerates how an inner world is expressed—through the depiction of the union between emotion and thought, human relationships, depiction of the described circumstances, and the external expression of an individual's psychological state.³⁰ Facial depictions, according to Kim Jong Il, serve as the basis for character portrayals:

An individual's face reveals subtly the individual's thoughts and emotions and one's complicated psychological movement. Within the face, the eyes express most sensitively and profoundly the inner world and the deepest thoughts of an individual... The face also plays an important role in character portrayals because its depiction is closely linked to an

²⁷ Kim Chǒngil, *Misullon*, 49-65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-51.

individual's actions and conduct, attire, and circumstances and environment.³¹

Strengthening the importance of the characters' reactions in glorifying Kim Il Sung, the character portrayals, according to the review, underscore Kim Il Sung's greatness and the wisdom of his leadership and guarantee the philosophical depth of the painting.³²

In many instances the reactions of characters considered at odds with the revolutionary history of Kim Il Sung also help to steer the ideological content of a painting. Through character portrayals, the dark nationalists are contrasted to the energetic masses:

In the portrayal of the nationalists, they are separated from the masses, emphasizing the fact that the nationalists are trying to reign over the masses. This can be seen clearly by the conduct of the nationalists, dressed in fancy silk clothes, sitting high on chairs covered with fine mats even embroidered with designs for comfort. The painting shows on many different levels how the nationalists, who were very arrogant in front of the masses only a short while ago, are embarrassed at this moment as the masses are overflowing with joy. In this scene, there is a person smoking a long cigarette deeply immersed in self-reproach, a person sweating profusely as their (nationalists) worldly ambitions come to light, an elderly and weak person who seems not to even possess any strength, yet trying to look up by raising the veins on his neck to see the enthusiasm of the masses, a person running away from the site without even time to save his face because he is afraid of the glares of the masses. Through such lowly depictions of the nationalists, the painting is confirming that the outdated

³¹ Ibid., 59-60.

³² Hong Ŭichŏng, "Chosŏn hyŏngmyŏng-ŭl inmin taejung-ŭi wiŏb-ero chŏnhwan shik'in widaehan yŏngsang: chosŏnhwa <hyŏngmyŏng yŏn'gŭk [3 in 1 tang] kongyŏn-ŭi nar-e> (Kim Sŏngmin chak)-e taehayŏ," 471.

nationalists have been abandoned due to their weaknesses by the masses.³³

The sense of shame and embarrassment felt by the nationalists is clearly palpable from their depictions in the painting and further emphasized by the review. In *The Treatise of Art*, Kim Jong Il writes about the importance of capturing the authentic form of corrupt individuals in character depictions. He states that if an appearance is artificially distorted because the personality that forms the inner quality of an individual is “disgraceful, evil, and vulgar,” then the authenticity of the character is lost.³⁴ As these character portrayals attest, the glorification of Kim Il Sung is not so much achieved by the depiction of the Great Leader for he remains still, but it is through the reactions of both the good and bad characters that Kim Il Sung becomes immortalized.

Structure, form, and coloring also contribute significantly in transmitting the correct ideological thought of the painting. The review explains the division of the painting into three groups: the masses, the stage, and the nationalists. Commenting on the structural layout of the painting, the review states that “by occupying the most space in the painting, the masses reveal the painting’s central idea.”³⁵ The review adds that by placing Kim Il Sung in the center of the masses, the painting clearly reveals the central focus and message of the painting. As for the color, “the painting balances and unifies the scene with whites and neutrals, and by depicting the Great Leader dressed in a black uniform, the painting achieves the creative achievement of focusing all eyes on the great appearance of Kim Il Sung.”³⁶ Color contributes to the idea of

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kim Chŏngil, *Misullon*, 55.

³⁵ Hong Ŭichŏng, “Chosŏn hyŏngmyŏng-ŭl inmin taejung-ŭi wiŏb-ero chŏnhwan shik’in widaehan yŏngsang: chosŏnhwa <hyŏngmyŏng yŏn’gŭk [3 in 1 tang] kongyŏn-ŭi nar-e> (Kim Sŏngmin chak)-e taehayŏ,” 471-472.

³⁶ Ibid, 472

beauty by enhancing the emotional element of a painting. In *The Treatise of Art*, Kim Jong Il writes that the use of color is one of the most important means of representing aesthetic value because it provides “strong and deep aesthetic emotion.”³⁷

This painting is a multilayered composition that pits the merits of Kim Il Sung’s anti-Japanese activities against the corrupt bourgeoisie nationalists. Physically, the painting takes place during the Japanese colonial period, highlighting the brewing tension between different factions on how to achieve liberation. The second layer pertains to Kim Il Sung as he stands in the center directing the revolutionary drama that he wrote—a moment that is stated as a historical truth by its mere depiction. The final layer is the revolutionary drama *The Three Pretenders* and the historical significance of revolutionary dramas in North Korean cultural production and the meaning behind the revival of the drama in 1987 as a political maneuver to solidify Kim Jong Il’s power. The vilified nationalists in the painting are the bourgeoisie nationalists who advocated a more gradual, conciliatory approach to liberation, struggling against the radical nationalists who supported a much more overt resistance to the Japanese through social revolution.³⁸ From their attire, the nationalists seem to be capitalist entrepreneurs or landlords, the classes Kim Il Sung sought to eradicate. The old bourgeoisie nationalists are juxtaposed with the children who represent the future, a link to the utopia depicted in paintings featuring an elderly Kim Il Sung. The crowd is composed of a wide range of individuals—intellectuals dressed in western attire, students dressed in their uniforms, and local villagers dressed in traditional attire. Moreover, all except Kim Il Sung are nameless in this painting; thus, representing not an individual, but a category or class of people.

³⁷ Kim Chŏngil, *Misullon*, 20.

³⁸ Michael E. Robinson, *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920-1925* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989). Bourgeoisie nationalists are considered cultural nationalists in the South Korean context.

Sense of Rapport

As witnessed above, the importance of the surrounding characters' reaction to Kim Il Sung is displayed through the extensive devotion placed on character descriptions in the painting's review. The interaction between characters, marked by the centripetal force formed around Kim Il Sung, is also well illustrated in the painting *Planning Today's P'yŏngyang* (figure 2). Set during the Korean War, the painting is praised in its review for being one of the representative artworks that illustrates the progress made in the field of North Korean art by correctly giving form to Kim Il Sung's theories. By depicting an appropriate historically-themed topic—how the construction of the city of P'yŏngyang began under the leadership of the Great Leader after the destruction of the Korean War—the review states that the painting displays the union between correct historical topic and an emotional element, and emotionally reproducing such historical truth (*yŏksajŏgin sasil*) on a canvas is the most important creative task of Juche art.³⁹ The painting depicts the moment when Kim Il Sung stepped onto a boat on the Taedong River at the break of dawn to plan the rebirth of P'yŏngyang after its devastation from the Korean War.

³⁹ “P'yŏngyang kŏnsŏr-ŭi saeach'im-ŭl ttŭt kipk'e hyŏngsanghan sunggohan yesulchŏk hwap'ok yuhwa <onŭl-ŭi P'yŏngyang-ŭl kusanghasiyŏ> (Hong Sŏngch'ŏl chak)-e taehayŏ,” *Chosŏn Misul Nyŏn'gam* ed. by Nam Minu, Kim Myŏngwŏn, Chŏng Wŏnyong, and Han Wŏn'gŭn (P'yŏngyang: Munye ch'ulp'ansa, 1986), 474-475.



Fig. 2: Planning Today's P'yŏngyang, Hong Sŏngch'ŏl, yuhwa, 1985

In the painting, three characters are featured—Kim Il Sung and two workers who surround him. Gazing far out into the ruins of P'yŏngyang, Kim Il Sung's line of vision travels to an imaginary place beyond the canvas. The Great Leader is seeing utopia somewhere far ahead, the imaginary place a symbol for the future reified as the reconstructed P'yŏngyang. The two workers hold the blueprint for utopia and look at Kim Il Sung and the blueprint, their gazes following the visionary, following the lead with a sense of devotion. The depicted scene is about subordination under the Great Leader. This sense of subordination is achieved by the two workers enclosing Kim Il Sung creating the effect of a circle centered on the Great Leader and through the strategy of a sense of rapport between the characters. While the physical unity around the Great Leader is achieved through the formation of a circle, the emotional unity around the Great Leader is reinforced by the sense of rapport between the characters. The formation of a circle tightens the structural organization of the scene by guiding the viewers' line of vision to the nucleus of the painting. Yet it is the sense of rapport, the interaction between the characters that holds the circle together emotionally, subordinating all under the Great Leader.

In the review, a description of Kim Il Sung, the artistic merits of the painting, and the importance of a sense of rapport is elucidated:

The Great Leader, dressed in plain clothes, is looking at the ruins of P'yŏngyang with eyes filled with the foresight and firm belief that P'yŏngyang will become the world's leading revolutionary city... This portrayal of the Great Leader based on a historical truth (*yŏksajŏgin sasil*)... A feeling of rapport (*kyogam*) permeates the painting with the depiction of two workers serving as assistants to the Great Leader in his plan to reconstruct P'yŏngyang... This sense of rapport plays an important role in characterizing and developing the Great Leader's revolutionary feats and, in turn, arousing the viewers' thoughts and sentiments... The placement of a worker holding a flashlight to see the blueprint not only suggests the darkness engulfing the area, but it also discloses the worker's sincere desire to help... Standing in front of the Great Leader and holding the blueprint, the design engineer displays his loyalty filled with the firm resolve to assist the Great Leader's efforts... Still wearing the army's padded jacket, the design engineer is filled with the determination to give all of his strength and wisdom to materializing the Great Leader's ambitious plan. His heartfelt portrayal reveals many things to the viewers.⁴⁰

In *The Treatise of Art*, Kim Jong Il describes in detail the importance of correctly capturing this sense of rapport. Kim Jong Il provides several reasons for employing a sense of rapport throughout an artwork:

⁴⁰ Ibid., 475-476.

When expressing people's faces it is important to correctly depict an individual's sense of rapport. A person's attitude on the depiction of an object is expressed through a person's facial expression and actions... Correctly depicting a sense of rapport is needed because it expands the range of themes found in life.⁴¹

The people featured in the painting have to be related and connected. That is, rapport exists between the people. Like the circle around Kim Il Sung in the revolutionary drama painting and the radial, hierarchical layout of the Graves of Revolutionary Martyrs,⁴² rapport is centered around the Great Leader, the uniting force between the people. The review states that although the worker and design engineer are portrayed differently due to their different positions and duties, the two characters are united because they are both contributing to the Great Leader's construction plan. This union creates the sense of rapport between the two characters and the use of color contributes to evoking emotions through the effects of subtle color changes.⁴³

The sense of rapport between the characters develops against the backdrop of reconstructing P'yŏngyang as the ultimate socialist utopia. The theme of rebuilding P'yŏngyang into a leading revolutionary city harks back to the Soviet preoccupation with remodeling Moscow into a new socialist city during the 1930s when architecture played a pivotal role in Stalinist political culture.⁴⁴ The influence from the Soviet Union is all the more tangible as the painting intimates the widespread Soviet influence on the construction of culture during the early years of the North Korean state, which also extended to the field of literature. While no direct

⁴¹ Kim Chŏngil, *Misullon*, 64.

⁴² Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2012), 114-115.

⁴³ "P'yŏngyang kŏnsŏr-ŭi saeach'im-ŭl ttŭt kipk'e hyŏngsanghan sunggohan yesulchŏk hwap'ok yuhwa <onŭl-ŭi P'yŏngyang-ŭl kusanghasiyŏ> (Hong Sŏngch'ŏl chak)-e taehayŏ," 474-475.

⁴⁴ Katerina Clark, "The 'New Moscow' and the New 'Happiness': Architecture as a Nodal Point in the Stalinist System of Value," in *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*, ed. by Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 189-199.

references to Soviet influence on other cultural fields are made in the painting, the time period of the depicted scene is an important clue. From 1946-1955, the period when this painting takes place, North Korean writers traveled to Moscow on Kim Il Sung's orders to produce tributes to the Soviet-North Korean friendship and Soviet life. What resulted were travelogues that presented the USSR as a socialist land of happiness to be emulated.⁴⁵ In this respect, this painting captures two elements: it alludes to the borrowing of Soviet culture in the formative years of North Korea and references the importance of architecture as a propagandistic tool. While the new P'yŏngyang is yet to be materialized, left to the imagination of the viewers, the painting nevertheless suggests the vital role architecture played through securing the visual landscape in legitimating Kim Il Sung's power. Though Kim Il Sung's gaze takes in the devastated P'yŏngyang, his gaze directed outside the painting is an augury for a bright, socialist utopian future.

Standing Alone in the Center



Fig. 3: The Spring of 1939, Kim Ch'anggil, yuhwa, 1985

⁴⁵ Tatiana Gabroussenko, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy* (Honolulu: University Hawaii Press, 2010), 13-45.

Unlike the two previous paintings, Kim Il Sung is depicted as a sole figure, surrounded by nothing other than nature and a horse in the painting titled *The Spring of 1939* (figure 3). Without the reaction of other characters formed in a circle to visually guide the viewers, the surrounding scenery and the title of the painting, instead, serve as important clues to unraveling the scene, almost as if creating an invisible circle centered on the Great Leader standing alone. *The Spring of 1939* is a North Korean history painting because it refers to one of the major military victories attributed to Kim Il Sung during the Japanese colonial period. According to the *Ryōksa Sajōn* (History Dictionary), Kim Il Sung led the Korean People's Revolutionary Army to a major victory against the Japanese army in May 1939 in the Musan region near the Korean-Chinese border. While in Manchuria where he was actively involved in anti-Japanese guerrilla activities, Kim Il Sung led the Revolutionary Army and entered Korea as part of a broader strategy to liberate the Korean peninsula from the Japanese. North Korea propagates the claim that while he was in Musan, Kim Il Sung had the prescience of an impending attack by the Japanese army and ordered his troops to prepare for conflict. Under his leadership, the Revolutionary Army was able to defeat the Japanese army, which attacked from five different positions.⁴⁶ The review explains the significant political and military blow to the Japanese caused by this victory, which turned the tide toward liberation. It continues with a diatribe against the Japanese colonial forces and enumerates the various injustices they inflicted on the Koreans. Particularly emphasized is the speed with which the news of the victory spread among all Koreans and the people's firm faith in the achievement of liberation as long as the Great Leader leads the revolutionary struggle for independence.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Chosŏn minjujuŭi inmin konghwaguk sahoe kwahagwŏn ryōksa yŏn'guso, ed., *Ryōksa Sajōn* vol. I (P'yŏngyang: Sahoe kwahak ch'ulp'ansa, 1971), 808-810.

⁴⁷ "Widaehan pom-e taehan sŏjŏngshijŏk hwap'ok: yuhwa <1939 nyŏn-ŭi pom> (Kim Ch'anggil chak)-e tachayŏ," 477.

When action and supporting characters are largely absent, an instantly recognizable event helps guide the viewers to the theme of a painting. In history paintings, this is all the more important because they directly drive the interpretation of history. Thus, not any event will do, but a meaningful event imbued with ideological content must be chosen to be depicted. After presenting the historical context in which the painting is set, the review emphasizes the importance of capturing an appropriate moment in artworks:

Correctly choosing a setting is an extremely important issue for an artwork, which must depict a complicated reality in a single moment. In an artwork, a setting that hits the mark must be chosen so that the connections between events that occurred before and after, which cannot be expressed intuitively, can emerge clearly and the inner world of the main character can be expressed...⁴⁸

Kim Jong Il devotes a section in *The Treatise of Art* to the importance of selecting a correct moment of opportunity to depict in an artwork.⁴⁹ He argues that depicting an appropriate moment allows “the profound and broad world of life to unfold” because an opportunity produces events and behaviors and serves as a condition from which an individual’s character develops. It is a turning point where the links between human relationships can be found.⁵⁰ Kim Jong Il further explains that unlike other mediums where a series of images can produce an organic whole, only one chance is given in art; therefore, a captured moment in art must embody the essence of truth and fully portray the event being depicted.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kim Chŏngil, *Misullon*, 90-94.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁵¹ Ibid., 91.

Transforming the historical battle at Musan into an emotionally identifiable event is achieved through nothing other than the Great Leader himself. Unlike many military paintings, neither battles nor soldiers are needed to convey the emotionality of the Musan battle. Instead, a description of Kim Il Sung is woven into the descriptions of the natural landscape to enhance the emotionality of the scene:

The painting captures the moment when the Great Leader, having arrived in his homeland, is standing at the foot of Mount Paektu, looking out far across his homeland's mountains and streams on a spring day. By capturing this moment, the painting emotionally embodies the inner ideological kernel of life. The imposing image of the Great Leader, dressed in military attire, is placed in the center. With the first saps of green sprouting and beautiful pink azaleas blooming, the Great Leader rises to the top of a high hill and looks toward the mountains and rivers of his homeland with compassionate, empathetic eyes. Hearing the voices of the people thirsting for rescue, the Great Leader, as if heartbroken, stands solemnly with his jacket flung open. A spring breeze from the homeland is blowing, carrying a loving emotion and lightly flapping the Great Leader's jacket.⁵²

Here, again, emotion is conjured in relation to Kim Il Sung despite his motionlessness, a telling reminder of the emotions that are meant to be stirred simply by the vision of the Great Leader.

The connection between the natural scenery to Kim Il Sung is illustrated in the following passage from the review:

⁵² "Widaehan pom-e taehan sŏjŏngshijŏk hwap'ok: yuhwa <1939 nyŏn-ŭi pom> (Kim Ch'anggil chak)-e taehayŏ," 477.

The painting serves as a model because it emotionally materializes the ideological content through the scenic depiction of the ripening of spring's vitality... What is unique about the unfolding early spring's lyrical scene is first and foremost that it serves as an inner support for the Great Leader's deep emotional and internal thoughts... Furthermore, the artwork is based on a historical truth (*yŏksajŏk sasil*) and rigorously accomplishes our Workers' Party's policies on art production, raising the artwork's value as an instructive and artistic work. Artworks that depict the Great Leader possess the cultural role of materializing Juche ideology; and therefore, they must thoroughly rely on historical truths while possessing a high artistic quality. This is because the artworks that depict the Great Leader must serve as memorials that commemorate the deeds of the Great Leader by reaching the realm of ideological art.⁵³

This passage reveals how natural phenomena inform us about the inner world of the depicted subject. Landscapes help reflect an individual's life. Depictions of landscape do not simply beautify nature, but contribute to the truthfulness of art by emotionally imparting correct thought. It also reveals that artworks must serve as memorials, reinforcing the idea of artworks as a monumental, lasting rendering of the revolutionary history of North Korea. Commenting further on the composition of the scene, the review states:

The azaleas are the azaleas of the homeland... Although the azaleas physically occupy a small portion of the painting, the historical truth (*yŏksajŏk sasil*) and abundant emotion inherent in the flowers underscore the significant weight the azaleas carry in the painting. Toward the rear of the painting, we see a white horse surrounded by birch and larch trees. Historically, the Great Leader did not ride a horse during his march toward

⁵³ Ibid., 477-478.

the homeland. However, the painting depicts a white horse reminiscent of the Ch'ŏllima that appears in legends for the glorification of the Great Leader... The panorama, filled with the plateau and highlands of Mount Paektu and the rolling white clouds, creates an ambience that accentuates the world of the Great Leader's deep, profound inner thoughts.⁵⁴

Reference to historical and artistic truth can be seen in this passage. Kim Il Sung may not have ridden a horse, but it is proper and truthful to have it in the painting. As a lone figure, the gaze of Kim Il Sung travels beyond the painting to a space outside the purview of the viewer. It is a vision of the future utopian socialist world that the Great Leader foresees from the mountains and rivers of his homeland. Not much happens in this painting, which makes it difficult to grasp what the painting is about. The absence of battle scenes and Mount Paektu further makes the painting difficult to decipher. The title is the clue, the link that informs us what is being told in the painting.

Visually Depicting the Center

Contrary to what is portrayed in North Korean pictorial representations, Kim Il Sung is not always glorified by simply occupying the center. In some pictorial representations featuring Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader may be physically placed in the center, yet the narrative does not necessarily glorify him. The painting *The Great Leader Witnessing the Brutality of the Japanese with His Mother at P'yŏngyang Prison* (figure 4) is a case in point. As indicated by the title, the painting depicts a scene where a young Kim Il Sung, holding the hand of his mother, watches the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 478. Ch'ŏllima is the Korean name for a mythical horse that can cover a large distance. Its name literally means "thousand-mile horse" and it is usually portrayed as a winged horse.

Japanese brutality against the Koreans unfurling before his eyes. Unlike the narratives where Kim Il Sung watches his revolutionary drama unfold on stage, strategizes the reconstruction of the destroyed P'yŏngyang, or contemplates the impending pivotal battle against the Japanese, deeply moved by the site of his homeland, the story of Kim Il Sung as a young boy watching the Japanese brutality against the Koreans itself is not a glorification. Instead, the visual depiction glorifies Kim Il Sung.



Fig. 4: The Great Leader Witnessing the Brutality of the Japanese with His Mother at P'yŏngyang Prison, Pak Kwangnim, Chosŏnhwa, 2000

The strategies employed in this painting are similar to those found in previous images. Kim Il Sung, along with his mother, is placed in the center of the scene, standing on top of a low staircase that has the effect of a stage. As a result, the line of vision in the painting travels either downward from Kim Il Sung to the masses or upward from the masses to Kim Il Sung. Either direction reinforces Kim Il Sung as the centripetal force in the scene. In the painting, a group of helpless, physically and emotionally worn-out Koreans are placed in the foreground lamenting the physical brutality committed by the Japanese. Composed of the old and young, men and women, the scene captures the young crying while the old seek to protect them from further violence. To the left of the scene, a group of captured Koreans tied in a human chain with their

heads covered is being led to the prison by a Japanese military officer wielding a sharp weapon. Another Japanese officer is seen beating a young Korean woman on the floor her hand reaching out to one of the prisoners, perhaps her husband, brother, or father. A smaller circle is formed immediately around Kim Il Sung comprised of not only his mother, but also students in uniform and a woman in traditional dress. The elevation of Kim Il Sung and his mother, albeit slight given the lowness of the staircase, is nevertheless immense in effect. Covering this smaller circle as an outer layer, a larger circle is formed encompassing the remaining characters. Together with his mother, Kim Il Sung is a towering, looming presence in the scene.

While the reactions of others are a vital element in creating the visual personality cult of Kim Il Sung, they play a much lesser role in this painting. The reactions of other characters are directed not toward Kim Il Sung but to the Japanese military officer beating the young Korean woman. The reaction of Kim Il Sung, too, is directed to the scene of assault. It is the idea of witnessing Japanese brutality as a child, a scene seared forever in the memory of Kim Il Sung that the painting reinforces. The smaller circle immediately around Kim Il Sung portends the widespread support he will secure in his lifelong path toward revolution while the larger circle ties the scene around him, visually securing the glorification of the Great Leader. Coupled with the stoic facial expression of the young Kim Il Sung and the elevated status of the Great Leader over the masses below him, the painting visually places Kim Il Sung in the center both physically and metaphorically.

The Making of a Kim Il Sung-Centered Utopia

Invoking images of sacredness and holiness, white is a glint of light that infuses a person or object with a sense of eternalness and pureness. Unlike Kim Il Sung's common appearance in dark attire, in several pictorial representations, he is dressed in white as in the painting *With Our Technology, With Our Strength* (figure 5). The whiteness of Kim Il Sung's jacket is all the more conspicuous for its juxtaposition to the dark, dirtied clothing of workers surrounding the Great Leader. Standing in the middle of a construction site during the post-Korean War years as part of the reconstruction efforts, Kim Il Sung is seen giving on-site instructions and encouragement to workers involved in rebuilding North Korea. With both hands clasped in determined fists, the Great Leader, as suggested by the title of the painting, is the embodiment of Juche ideology, putting into action his principles of self-reliance to rise from the ashes of destruction through self-strength. The Great Leader in white emboldening workers is forever hovering, looming over the people, guiding and protecting them in times of difficulty as an inspirational spirit.



Fig. 5: With our Technology, With our Strength, Pak Taeyŏn, Chosŏnhwa, 1990



Fig. 6: At the Site of the Bumper Pumpkin Crop, Pak Taeyŏn, Chosŏnhwa, 1985

Pictorial representations of Kim Il Sung as an aged man show a world that is perpetually happy, plentiful, and glorious. Usually surrounded by happy workers, farmers, and children among fresh fruits and vegetables, the Great Leader is an eternal father-figure for everyone, a constant source of inspiration as shown in the painting *At the Site of the Bumper Pumpkin Crop* (figure 6). Seen at a thriving pumpkin farm surrounded by farmers, the painting captures Kim Il Sung showering his love to the people. The review of the painting describes Kim Il Sung's portrayal, emphasizing his image as a father-figure for all North Koreans:

Speaking freely with the farmers and asking about the number of pumpkins and their weights, and the amount of pumpkins required for feeding livestock, the Great Leader is actively developing a solution for providing sufficient feed for livestock. The Great Leader also recognizes the peoples' loyalty, which is pure and clean as crystal, and is encouraging the hard efforts of the farmers. The painting glorifies the Great Leader's noble communist virtues through his benevolent image. It reminds the viewers that the Great Leader is always one with the people and receives

immense gratification from the happy lives of the people—the bliss and happiness increasing day by day.⁵⁵

The emphasis placed on character descriptions can be traced to Kim Jong Il's explanation on how art produces emotional reactions through the depiction of beauty in *The Treatise of Art*. According to Kim Jong Il, depictions that elicit aesthetic feelings are divided into man, society, and nature with man as the most important. He states that, "Man is the master of the world and thereby is the most beautiful and powerful being in the universe. Man develops society through autonomous and creative activities and struggles, creates a beautiful life, and makes society and nature more beautiful."⁵⁶ Beauty in man is revealed by the presence of thought consciousness (*sasang chǒngsinjǒk p'ungmo*) that is based upon political thought consciousness (*chǒngch'i sasang ūisik*). It is only when the physical attributes are in harmony with the inner world that beauty exists in man.⁵⁷ Thus, the reviews devote large sections to meticulous physical and mental descriptions of characters. Just as art is beautiful only when historical truth is emotionally felt, man is beautiful only when he or she is imbued with socialist political consciousness.

The harmony between physical attributes and an inner world can be further seen in other character descriptions featured in the painting:

The painting features an elderly farmer who is walking along deeply moved and has forgotten all the difficulties of life through the Great Leader's love, a female worker responsible for breeding livestock whose heart has swelled with the pride and joy of showing the Great Leader a

⁵⁵ Ham Inbok, "Polsurok kip'ün kamdong-ül chu-nūn hwap'ok: chosŏnhwa <hobak p'ungjagi tūn ilt'ŏ-esŏ> (Pak Taeyŏn chak)-e taehayŏ," *Chosŏn Misul Nyŏn 'gam* 1986, 472-473.

⁵⁶ Kim Chǒngil, *Misullon*, 11.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

ripe pumpkin, and a young female tractor driver who is looking at the Great Leader with great admiration. Through the depiction of these individual yet simple characters, the painting movingly shows the humaneness of the Great Leader and the noble comradeship between the Great Leader and the people.⁵⁸

Descriptions of emotions are a part of what these art reviews are about. They are also about how to view paintings and the history the viewer is relating to. The historical understanding that is supported throughout these artworks is based on emotional understanding and appeal. This passage also shows the “sloganesque” language used throughout the reviews to describe Kim Il Sung and the people’s reaction to him. By using formulaic language, the effectiveness of the painting is increased because it situates the painting in a familiar narrative, which shapes historical interpretation and understanding.

How Kim Il Sung achieves the primary focal point of the painting through centering is explained in the review:

In general, works depicting the Great Leader and the working class possess the characteristics of a monument because they feature the Great Leader’s revolutionary activities... Therefore, the primary and most important element in paintings featuring the Great Leader is his placement on canvas... In this painting, the Great Leader is placed in the center while other characters are harmoniously arranged. An arch made out of pumpkin vines located at the top of the canvas contributes to highlighting the Great Leader in the center. By placing the image of the Great Leader walking with the elderly farmer in the front and the female livestock breeder, female farmer, and the tractor driver in the rear of the canvas, the

⁵⁸ Ham Inbok, “Polsurok kip’ün kamdong-ül chu-nün hwap’ok: chosŏnhwa <hobak p’ungjagi tün ilt’ŏ-esŏ> (Pak Taeyŏn chak)-e taehayŏ,” 473.

painting is structurally designed so that attention is first drawn to the image of the Great Leader.⁵⁹

Here it is important to note the reference to a monument when creating artworks on Kim Il Sung and the working class, which was also mentioned in the review of the painting *Spring of 1939*. With the reduction of history to the history of Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader is monumental. Monumentality is both in story as shown through the paintings of the personality cult and physical size as captured in the image *My Country that Serves the Great Leader at the Top is the Best!* (figure 7). Resembling a monument or a monumental building, Kim Il Sung in the center is physically towering over the ebullient masses. With two of the most iconic North Korean monuments (Juche Tower and the Arch of Triumph) placed on either side of Kim Il Sung, the metaphor of the Great Leader as a monument is all the more resonant.

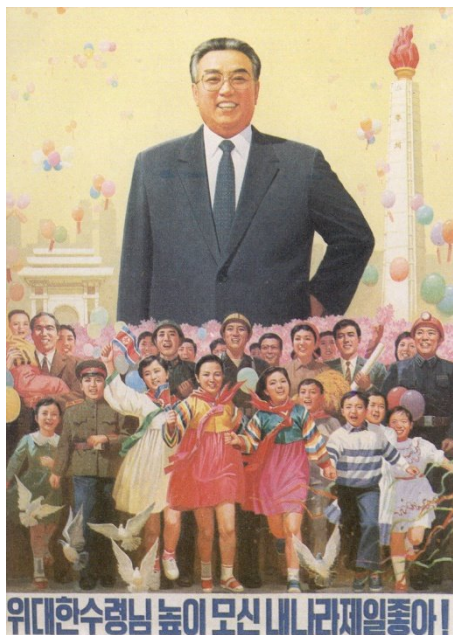


Fig. 7: My Country that Serves the Great Leader at the Top is the Best!, Pyŏn Hyoch'an, ch'ulpanhwa, 1993

⁵⁹ Ibid.

As an eternal monument, the Great Leader always secures the admiration and respect of the people. In the review of *At the Site of the Bumper Pumpkin Crop*, it describes the four different characters featured in the painting, including a person of merit and a female middle school student:

Walking respectfully and with no pretenses alongside the Great Leader and holding his hat in one hand, the elderly farmer is a Party member with many merits who has worked his entire life devoted to the Great Leader and the Party. Through the female livestock breeder who has a radiant smile on her face and who is trying to observe the Great Leader's on-the-site instructions on maintaining a bumper crop, we see the young generation's pure and clean loyalty. The people's admiration and ardent desire to follow the Great Leader are reflected in the female farmer whose hand is placed near her mouth deeply saddened by the prospect of parting with the Great Leader. The desire to serve next to the Great Leader by accomplishing numerous meritorious deeds is reflected in the psychological characterization of the female tractor driver whose hands are clasped in front of her while holding a face towel.⁶⁰

In this description, we see the characters' inner worlds and a sense of rapport at work. The detailed description of the characters' thoughts and their emotional reactions to the presence of the Great Leader illustrate how the central function of glorifying Kim Il Sung is accomplished. Like the previously examined paintings, everyone is nameless except Kim Il Sung. Lastly, the review emphasizes the noteworthiness of the use of color by creating a sense of space between the front and rear parts, which makes sure that Kim Il Sung and his immediate surroundings are bright and focused.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

As part of the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, the paintings examined here are the vignettes that comprise the monumental narrative delineated in the *Images of the Immortal*, depicting the evolution of the Great Leader from a young man during the Japanese colonial period, to a middle-aged man during the Korean War, and finally to an elderly man on the cusp of the twilight of his life. Dramatizing history through emotionally correct thoughts, most of the paintings have explicit historical references, informing us through various strategies how historical moments should be understood and internalized. The paintings *At the Site of the Bumper Pumpkin Crop* and *My Country that Serves the Great Leader at the Top is the Best* are the end product, the conclusion of the narrative being told—the creation of a socialist utopia with Kim Il Sung in the center whose presence invests all of the paintings with a powerful, luminous force.