

KIM JONG IL: A FILM DIRECTOR WHO RAN A COUNTRY

Nicolas Levi

Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures,
Polish Academy of Sciences
nicolas_levi@yahoo.fr

ABSTRACT

The considered text aims at explaining the passion of the former North Korean leader Kim Jong Il (1942-2011) for cinema. The paper will proceed in three steps: Explaining the Cinema Passion of Kim Jong Il, outlining its realizations in North Korea. The third party will focus on the kidnapping of Choi Seun Hee and Shin Sang Ok. Kim Jong Il wanted that all films were made according to the North Korean ideology for which he was responsible. Starting from the mid 1970's, Kim Jong Il implemented cinema in his strategical polical approach through some of the political departments of the Korea Workers' Party. North Korean movies were supposed to strengthen and legitimate the power of the Kim family and the image of North Korea abroad. As far as media were under the control of the state organization Kim Jong Il was a director, a producer, even a costume maker, a screenwriter, cameraman, a sound engineer and he was also seen as a film theorist. What has to be enlighten is the fact that until the his death, Kim Jong Il was affected by cinema.

KEYWORDS:

Choi Ik Kyu, Choi Seun Hee, Cinema, Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Eun, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Suk, Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Korean Workers Party, Shin Sang Ok, Song Hye Rim, South Korea, Yi Jong Mok

INTRODUCTION

Kim Jong Il (1942–2011) was the second most important leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (called further North Korea) after his father Kim Il Sung (1912–1994). Both of them ruled over North

Korea (Kim Il Sung passed away in July 1994 and Kim Jong Il in December 2011) Actually, the son of Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Eun (b. in 1983), is ruling over North Korea.

North Korea is a country localized on the north of the Korean Peninsula. This country is bordered by two international economic powers: China and South Korea. The population of North Korea reached 24 million of habitants. The political system of this country is entitled as being kimilsungist. In our western media we call it a despotic regime or "one of the last communist countries of the world" (David Blair, *Kim Jong-un, the child soldier, takes over in North Korea*). The North Korean political system cannot be assimilated to systems which are functioning in other countries of the world. Its opaque and unidentified structure put a lot of questions on the table: how to define it? What are the pillars of this system? Who is ruling over this country?

The content of this paper doesn't aim at giving a preponderant answer to all of political issues which are often analyzed in research papers related to North Korea. In the current paper, I will also try to demonstrate how movies are emphasizing and explaining the nature of the North Korean system. Therefore will also explain the passion of Kim Jong Il for cinema and how he used movies to strengthen the North Korean system (whatever it refers to). This topic is especially essential to understand not only the North Korean system but also Kim Jong Il himself. This is a topic, at least as far as I know, which wasn't covered by the western literature. It has to be underlined that whilst most of the literature focusing on Kim Jong Il has concentrated on his personal and political life, very little attention has been paid to his passion for cinema. Kim Jong Il's passion for cinema is legendary: Kim Jong Il was reputed to have a library of about 20 thousand of movies and had a staff of about 100 people whose sole job is to subtitle foreign films in Korean. According to Shin Sang Ok, a South Korean film-maker who spent eight years in North Korea making films with Kim Jong Il, the Dear Leader's favorite film was "Friday the 13th" (Terry MacCarthy, *The Korean Succession – fears of power struggle in North Korea*, 11th July 1994. "The Independent"). During the preparation of movies, Kim Jong Il was also in touch with North Korean actors, he also was present when they were some foreign contributors however, according to Johannes Schönherr, Kim Jong Il was never discussing with these foreigners (Johannes Schönherr, *Films for the Great Leader?*, "DailyNK.com", 24th April 2010). This was probably done in order to maintain an auspice of secrecy around the North Korean leader.

The paper will proceed in three steps: (1) Explaining the Cinema Passion of Kim Jong Il, (2) Outlining its realizations in North Korea. The third party (3) will focus on the The kidnapping of Choi Seun Hee and Shin Sang Ok.

THE CINEMA PASSION OF KIM JONG IL

The role of cinema has been underlined in the ideological thesis of Kim Il Sung, the father of Kim Jong Il. Cinema was always present in the Korean culture and associated to the political regime. Already during the Japanese occupation, the cinema industry was under the control of the Japanese Government. Coming back to Kim Il Sung, according to one of the paper which was supposedly written by Kim Il Sung (published in 1960), Kim Il Sung said:

“All kinds of art are necessary for the education of our working people and young folks, but stress should be laid on novels and films. Above all, we should produce a lot of good films. (Kim Il Sung, 1977, p. 158)

“Like the leading article of the Party Paper, the cinema should have great appeal and move ahead of the realities. Thus it should play a mobilizing role in each stage of the revolutionaries struggle. (Kim Jong Il, 1987, p. 4)”

He also adds:

“Movies represent the best form of Propaganda for our Party. They have to be watched simultaneously by a lot of people in each existent places. A movie director can present long historical actions in only a few hours. Therefore movies constituted a tool which is more relevant than theater because there are no limits regarding places where can the actions be performed”. (Kim Il Sung, 1981, p. 129.)

In a text published in 1958, Kim Il Sung evaluated movies as being

„the most effective way to educate the mass” (Kim Il Sung, 1981, p. 9)

Among histories found in the propaganda book *“Great Man and Cinema”*, one of them is related to the visit of Kim Jong Il to a projection

entitled "My village" (*Naegohyang*) in 1949 in the presence of his mother Kim Jong Suk. Before the entrance of the cinema, some people were not able to pay tickets and Kim Jong Il decided to give them his own ticket: here started the romantic relationship between Kim Jong Il and the cinema industry. Being alone in his youth, Kim Jong Il spend his lonely times watching Russian and Chinese movies being educated in China and during his trips to Moscow. Starting from his 20's, Kim Jong Il continues to develop his passion for the cinema industry. Movies were Kim's main interest during his college days. Everyday, he used to stop at the Central Film Distribution Center, a dedicated two-stores building that was located between the Pyongyang railroad station and Botong Gate among all the Russian-style apartment buildings built right after the Korean War. The manager at the Central Film Distribution Center first thought that Kim Jong Il had an increasing interest in movies. The manager even provided Kim Jong Il a separate viewing room for exclusive use of Kim Jong Il (John H. Cha and K.J. Sohn, 2012, p. 23, 2012).

During these times and when he was watching all this kind of movies, it was his mean of communication to the outside world and the way to get some information concerning other countries. He probably understood the value of the mass media and decided to use movies as a basis for his power that he was supposed to inherit from his father.

Kim Jong Il was probably very interested in cinema not only for political matters but also for love one. According to South Korean sources, one of the first true loves of Kim Jong Il was Song Hye Rim. She had an important impact on life of Kim Jong Il because she impregnated the political and private life of Kim Jong Il. Song Hye Rim is one of the first women who lived with Kim Jong Il.

Kim Jong Il didn't had the occasion to have a fully youth of joys and pleasures. His mother Kim Jong Suk died in 1949 in unexplained circumstances. On the 22nd September 1949, Kim Jong Suk passed away after probable complications associated to a bad-managed pregnancy. However according to various sources she committed suicide refusing some pills. Kim Jong Suk was aware that her husband had connections with other women (especially Kim Sung Ae, the next wife of Kim Il Sung). North Korean media are never publishing any sort of articles related to the death of the mother of Kim Jong Il. I was personally discussing this issue during a visit in Pyongyang but nobody was able to answer to my questions. Kim Jong Il was highly affected by the death of his mother especially taking in account that Kim Jong Il was only educated by her (his father Kim Il Sung

was more focused on issues related to the preparation of the Korean War). As a side-consequence, he didn't accept his step-mother which also didn't respect him and his sister Kim Kyung Hee. Therefore Kim Jong Il tried to find some comfort in the arms of other women.

Kim Jong Il met Song Hye Rim (born in 1937) around 1968 when he headed the Culture and Art Guidance Division of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Workers Party of Korea, where he was responsible for film productions. In these times, Song Hye Rim was a married woman with a daughter, and she was five years older than Kim Jong Il. Song Hye Rim graduated from the elementary school affiliated with the Seoul National University College of Education and defected to the North with her parents (Her father Sung Yu Kyung was an intellectual and a former member of the South-Korean Communist Party. Song Hye Rim's was a reporter for Rodong Sinmun in North Korea.) when she was a student at Pungmun Girls' Middle School where she was highly appreciated for her beauty (John Cha and Kim Sohn, 2012, p. 31). In 1960, she graduated from Pyongyang University of Theater and Cinematic in spite of being prepared to go to Kim Il Sung University. Song Hye Rim was already an actress who dominated the North Korean film scene (other famous actresses were U In Hui, and Kim Hyon Suk). At the age of 19, Song Hye Rim was forced to marry the son of Lee Kee Young, a former director of the North Korean Association of Writers. Another son of Lee Kee Young was also a friend of Kim Jong Il who introduced him to Song Hye Rim. According to Michael Breen, the author of the biography of Kim Jong Il entitled *Kim Jong-Il: North Korea's Dear Leader*, Song Hye Rim was unsatisfied with her previous marriage and was open to a new relationship. After completing a movie called *Fate of a Volunteer*, she divorced her husband, who was a famous North Korean actor (Michael Breen, p. 72, 2004). In 1960 she was introduced by Kim Il Sung, who was highly satisfied by her role in the movie *A Village by the Divided Line*, to the North Korean Film Arts Studios where she starred a lot of movies. Song Hye Rim was an actress in the following films: (Omgongryon) in 1961, *Baekil-bong* in 1963 which were highly acclimated in North Korea. Kim Jong Il started in the mid-60's to date her in secret. Their relationship culminated with the birth of Kim Jong Nam in May 1971.

She became a party member, because Kim Jong Il was showing interest in her. She was also a North Korean delegate to the film festival which took place in Phnom Penh in 1968. Kim Jong Il not only felt in love with Song Hye Rim. He was also using her in propaganda movies. Song Hye

Rim advised him how to erect movies which would legitimize the power of Kim Il Sung, the father of Kim Jong Il. These elements may explain the highly nature of North Korean cinema during the 1970s and can be seen in titles such as *The People Sing of the Fatherly Leader* and *The Rays of Juche Spread All Over the World*.

In 1973, Kim Jong-il published his *De l'art cinematographique*, a XX pages pamphlet about the cinema industry.

CINEMA REALIZATIONS OF KIM JONG IL IN NORTH KOREA

In the late 60's Kim Jong Il was nominated to culture arts director of the Information Department where he was in charge of the publishing department. He was responsible for cleaning the anti-Party elements in the field of arts. Then he started to concentrate on projects related to the idolization of his father Kim Il Sung. In 1968 he started to do public inspections (1724 inspections and 10487 advices according to the official North Korean statistics)

Kim Jong Il was also responsible for the modernization of Pyongyang studios. A lot of equipment from Europe and Soviet Union were exported to North Korea. A lot of actors were sent to Central Europe (In Poland, A lot of movies for children were prepared by North Korean specialists who were educated in Poland. The most famous North Koreans who were based in Bielsko Biala (the place where were prepared episodes of "Reksio I Kawki" weren Chon Song Chol, Kim Dok Jong, Kim Kwan Son, Kwon Jong Kil and Pak Gwang Hion.) where they used to study in the best cinema University. Other were educated at the Pyongyang University of Cinematic and Dramatic Arts. Artists and members of the Pyongyang Movies Studios got even their own dedicated store, where they had an access to imported goods from abroad. In exchange of the previous mentioned rewards, the team of artists produced some revolutionaries pieces such as *Flower Girl*, *Milam*, *Pibada*, a movie about family's struggle against land-owners and Imperial Japan. The main actress of the North Korean movie entitled *Flower Girl* was Hong Jong Hui. She was imprisoned by Kim Jong Il who was responsible of her private life. Kim Jong Il authorized personally her wedding with the Conductor of an orchestra attached to the Ministry of the Public Security (Waldemar Dziak, p. 159, 2004). However the trajectory for these artists follows a hard training process in which a balance has to be made between the technical artistic training and the political indoctrination. According to Koen De Ceuster, the ideological

training can be view under two aspects: on the one hand, instruction in the cultural policies of the party and on in the second hand, what art means in and for North Korea and therefore what it means to be an artist in North Korea.

North Korean movies were supposed to strengthen and legitimate the power of Kim Il Sung. As far as media were under the control of the state organization (media were co-managed by Kim Jong Il and a trusted advisor: Choe Ik Kyu. Choe Ik Kyu was a Vice Director of the Information Department of the Central Committee of the Party, charged with disseminating propaganda to the public. He formerly managed the nation's film productions; He fell into disfavor with Kim Jong Il and got sacked after the escape of the kidnapped South Korean actress Choi Eun Hee and her film director husband Shin Sang Ok in 1986. He's currently a trusted advisor to Kim Jong Eun.) and reached the entire population, cinema could also influence the character of the North Korean population. In the 60's movies were rather focused on the Korean War as far as the North Korean population was still affected by the consequences of this Conflict. In the 70's, the situation started to change as more movies started to focus on Kim's family (especially on the history of Kim's parents and grand-parents). In the same period, more movies were also focused on the North Korean ideology (the Juche ideology) and it spreading all over the world. In one of the propaganda texts of the Koreans Workers Party, it has been said that

“during the last years, our cinematographic art was exceptional in comparison to the world cinema. Revolutionaries of the entire world are complementing us. According to them, North Korean producers are creating the best films the world knew in its entire history and these films are exceptionally revolutionaries” (Korean Review, p. 119, 1974).

The previous mentioned Choe Ik Kyu cooperated in the 70's with Yi Jong Mok, a former deputy foreign minister, who was also responsible for acquiring Hollywood movies and other foreign films. Foreign movies may also represent a threat to the North Korean regime (at least according to the North Korean authorities). In the 2000's, the North Korean government accused the United States and South Korea of sending in books and DVDs as part of a covert action to topple the regime. DVD salesmen were arrested and sometimes executed for treason. Members of the Workers' Party delivered lectures warning people against dangers of the

foreign culture. Yi Jong Mok's employees were also often in Hong Kong where they used to acquire movies for the Kim Jong Il. The distribution of movies (under the name of Operation No. 100) operated by Yi Jong Mok involved the cooperation of various embassies of all across the world. That's why the private collection of Kim Jong Il's movies reached even 20 thous. films. He likes *La Traviata*, *Danny Boy* and pleased the population by allowing some American cartoons to be shown on the North Korean national television such as *Bugs Bunny*, *Donald Duck* and *Tom and Jerry* (Bruce Cumings, p. 161, 2004).

The major parts of Propaganda Movies which are available in North Korea are very often connected to the idea of loyalty toward Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Eun. The Cinema has a propaganda role:

Today the cinema has the task of contributing to the development of people to be true communists and to the revolutionization and working-classization of the whole of society (Kim Jong Il, p. 4, 1987).

A very important element of the propaganda art of North Korea is also history. According to the assumptions of the historical policy of North Korea, North Korean citizens should be convinced that the *Renaissance* of their country started in 1912 and is directly connected to the birth and life of Kim Il Sung. Therefore Kim Jong Il didn't introduce the historical theme related to the history of Korea before 1900, i.e. the beginning of the Japanese occupation over Korea. Kim Jong Il refused also to introduce the Chosŏn dynasty in North Korean movies. Kim Jong Il was responsible for the making of the film entitled *An Jung Gŭn hits Ito Hirobumi*, which explain the history of An Jung Gŭn – a Korean nationalist, who stroked in 1909 a Japanese gubernator in Harbin. This is a classical North Korean movie which was produced by a friend of Kim Jong Il: Ŏm Kilsŏn. In July 1971, Kim Jong Il co-produced with Choe Ik Kyu a revolutionary opera entitled *Sea of Blood* (*pipada*). Its title referred to the Heroical behavior of Koreans during the Japanese Occupation. The songs which are performed during the opera do not contain any kind of words with reference to the Chinese language as a way of demonstrating the purity of the Korean language. As it was a major success of the North Korean movies, in November 1972, Kim Jong Il (also in cooperation with Choe Ik Kyu) prepared another movie *The young flower woman Kotpanum Chonio* which was available on screens in 1972 and which was also associated to the Japanese Occupation of the Korean Peninsula. The key actress of this movie, Hong

Yong hui was also a mistress of Kim Jong Il and had the great honor of being represented on North Korean bills.

What is the impact on the North Korean population? One of the most famous researchers on North Korean issues, Andrei Lankov, explained that the average North Korean citizen goes 21 times a year to cinema. As a comparison South Korean people go to cinema 2,3 times a year. Andrei Lankov underlines that North Koreans go so often to cinema not because they are fond of North Korean movies but because theses watching are incorporated in their duties. These screenings are organized in state institutions such as in schools, high schools, universities, some administrations and in the buildings of the North Korean Army (Kang Hyok, p. 3, 2007).

THE KIDNAPPING OF CHOI SEUN HEE AND SHIN SANG OK

Starting from 1987, every two years, an International Cinema Festival takes place in the main city of North Korea: Pyongyang. During the 12th edition of the Festival, spectators were able to watch more than 100 movies originally from Russia, China, Iran, Poland, Sweden and United Kingdom. Why the most isolated country of the world organize an international festival of cinema? This festival aims at “the promotion, the exchange and the cooperation between movies producers on the conditions of fraternity, independence and peace” and was even entitled as “the most important cinema festival of the world”. It seems however that the true aim of the North Korean propaganda was to present how North Korea is an open country especially regarding the cultural cooperation. Nevertheless Kim Jong Il was conscious of the poverty of North Koreans production. Among others this was also due to political reasons: some North Korean artists were sent to Labor Camps and this decrease the quality of North Korean movies. Kim Jong Il regretted also bitterly that North Korean artists were only focused on revolutionary operas: it was the source of a conflict between him and Choe Ik Kyu. Furthermore Choe Il Sim, Choe Ik Kyu’s daughter is also involved in the North Korean movies production. Choe Il Sim was responsible for the production of Naga Pun Nara (*The country I saw*), a movie in two parts which was produced in 2009. She started very early her carrier as a producer.

Therefore around 1977, Kim Jong Il ordered the kidnapping of a top South Korean actress: Choi Eun Hee. In 1978, Choi was invited to Hong Kong by associates who kidnapped her and forced her to leave for North

Korea via an eight days boat trip toward the city of Nampo (Michael Breen, p. 72, 2004). She wasn't in contact with Kim Jong Il until 1981. Afterwards, Choi was regularly invited to parties organized for the North Korean leadership. She also started to advise Kim Jong Il on the realization of some movies. Her first comments were related to the movie *Sea of Blood*. Her former husband Shin Sang Ok who was looking for her was also kidnapped in Hong Kong in 1983. In march 1983, Choi met Shin at a dinner party in presence of Kim Jong Il. Both of them were given an annual budget of 2 million of dollars, they could write to their family and travel abroad. Their role was to advise Kim Jong Il on cinema issues. From 1983 on, Shin directed seven films with Kim Jong Il acting as an executive producer. The best known of films produced by Shin Sang Ok was *Pulgasari*, a giant-monster film similar to the Japanese *Godzilla*. *Pulgasari* is a 1985 North Korean monster movie about a creature which helps Korean peasants triumph over their government. It was produced by Shin Sang Ok and directed by Chong Gon Jo, an associate to Kim Jong Il. It's interesting to not that special effects were handled by Japan's Toho Studios. Some Japanese actors also participated to the movie such as Kenpachiro Satsuma, who was *Pulgasari* in the movie. In 1984 Shin Sang Ok produced what he considered as his finest film, *Runaway* – the story of a wandering Korean family of 1920s Manchuria dealing with Japanese oppression. Finally in 1986, being in Vienna, Shin and Choi evaded and reached the US embassy. From another prospective, some people thought that Shin wanted to leave for North Korea because he wasn't fully appreciated by the South Korean government.

CONCLUSION

Kim Jong Il, the former leader of North Korea was not only known as being the “Dear Leader” but he was known as a fan of cinema. He especially recognized the film's potential for propaganda. He also organized the kidnapping of South Korea's most famous film director, wrote several treatises on cinema and had of course large collections of videos and DVDs. Kim Jong Il understood how cinema affected the ordinary Korean citizen and the image of North Korea abroad (“He taught that film must concentrate on the message of the revolution, and must tell about the real lives of the Koreans. He wanted that all films were made according to the North Korean ideology”). The cinema was a key-element of his ruling strategy. Kim Jong Il was a director, a producer, even a costume maker,

a screenwriter, cameraman, a sound engineer... and he was also seen as a film theorist. What has to be enlighten is the fact that until the his death, Kim Jong Il was affected by cinema.

The passion of Kim Jong Il for movies was also shown in some movies which were focused on North Korean issues. In the polish movie *Defilada*, produced by Andrzej Fidyk in 1989, the North Korean guide is underlining the frequent visits of Kim Jong Il in the studios of Pyongyang: „The Dear Leader visits our studio 332 times and gave some guidelines” (Marta Polkowska, [in] Nicolas Levi, p. 138, 2011). In the same scene, the guide indicates that: „the Dear Leader said that art should be under the control of the politics. The producer must be an ideological teacher, he must be responsible for the ideological indoctrination each cultural workers. In the capitalism, the producer is only a paid agent who is under the control of capitalists. The advices performed by our Dear Leader were precious and therefore our films reached the state of art (*Defilada*. Fidyk, Pyongyang/Warsaw 1989).

REFERENCES

- Foster-Carter A., *Soap, sleeze: North Korea's first family*, „Asia Times”, 2nd March 2002.
- Bradley K. M., *Under the loving care of the fatherly leader, North Korea and the Kim dynasty*, St. Martin's Press, New York 2004.
- Breen M., *Kim Jong Il: North Korean's leader*, John Wiley and Sons (Asia) Pte. Ltd., Singapore 2004.
- Cha John and Kim Sohn, *Exit Emperor Kim Jong Il*, Abbott Press, London 2012.
- Cheong Seong Chang, *Idéologie et système en Corée du Nord*, L'Harmattan 1997, Paris.
- Coppola A., *Le cinéma nord-coréen : arme de destruction massive ?*, *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique*, nr 102, 2007.
- De Ceuster Koen, “To be an artist in North Korea: Talent and then some more”, [in] Frank Rüdiger (Ed.), *Exploring North Korean Arts*, Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Vienna 2010.
- Demick B., *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, Spiegel & Grau, New York 2010
- Cummings Bruce, *North Korea: Another Country*, The New Press, New York 2004.
- Dziak W., *Kim Jong Il*, wyd TRIO, Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 2004.

- Kang Hyok, *This is Paradise! My North Korean childhood*, Abacus, London 2007
- Kim Il Sung, *On the development of educational work*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang 1980.
- Kim Il Sung, *Pour la création d'une littérature et d'un art révolutionnaires*, Editions en langues étrangères de Pyongyang, Pyongyang 1972.
- Kim Jong Il: *The Cinema and Directing*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang 1987.
- Polkowska M., "Sztuka Korei Północnej" (The Art of North Korea), [In] Nicolas Levi, *Korea Północna: Poszukując Prawdy* (North Korea: In the Research of the Truth), Kwiaty Orientu, Warszawa 2011
- Pulikowski K., *Wstocznyj Ekspres. Po Rosii s Kim Czen Irom*, Gorodiec, Moscow 2002.
- Schönherr J., *Films for the Great Leader?*, "DailyNK.com", 24th April 2010.
- Szablowski W., *Fidyk Stories*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 30th August 2008.
- Shinn Shul Il, *Kim Jong Il and Cinema Politica*, My friend Publisher, Seoul 2002.
- The true story of Kim Jong Il*, The Institute for South North Korean Studies, Seoul 1993.
- Yi Hyo In, *A History of Korean Cinema : from Liberation through the 1960's*, Korean Film Archive, Seoul, 2005.