

Visualizing Greatness: The Depiction of the Leader in North Korean Thematic Paintings

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1. Introduction

North Korea¹ has been a point of attention to the international community for many years now. Ever since the country developed into a socialist state under the leadership of Kim Il Sung after the end of the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula, many academics have attempted to analyze the inner workings of the state and the personality cult which developed around its leader Kim Il Sung. Although the workings of the personality cult have been examined from a historical, psychological, sociological and ethnological perspective, research about the personality cult on the basis of the visual arts produced in the country itself are scarce. The North Korean government produces copious amounts of propaganda art every year, most of which is centered around the depiction of the image of the leader. The visual arts are one of the most used platforms for the dissemination of North Korean propaganda, and could therefore give much insight into the personality cults of the North Korean leaders.

In this thesis, I will be conducting a comparative analysis of the depiction of Kim Il Sung and the depiction of Kim Jong Il in North Korean thematic paintings (*chujehwa*). In doing so, I want to determine how these paintings reflect the personality cults of the two Leaders, and whether there are any differences and similarities in the way the two leaders are depicted. I will be analyzing paintings of Kim Il Sung, paintings of Kim Jong Il, and paintings of the two leaders together. Since an analysis of the depiction of the personality cults of the leaders in North Korean visual arts in general would be too broad a subject for a MA thesis, I have decided to focus on thematic paintings, which comprise an essential genre of painting within North Korean art theory.² While it would be interesting to examine the manner in which the North Korean leaders are illustrated in various other forms of visual art, other genres of visual art will be excluded from the analysis conducted in this thesis. This research is relevant because (to my knowledge) there is no such analysis of North Korean propaganda paintings which depict Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il yet. In my thesis, I will carry out thorough research of the personality cults of both leaders, as well as North Korean art theory. For my theoretical framework, I will present various theories about the definition of the terms ‘personality cult’ and ‘propaganda’. Furthermore, I will conduct a visual analysis of North Korean thematic paintings by utilizing a methodology of semiotics and iconography.

Therefore, my research question is: “How are the personality cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il reflected in North Korean thematic paintings (주제화)?”

¹ The term ‘North Korea’ and the official denomination ‘DPRK’ will be used interchangeably in this thesis.

² Harry Tupan and Koen de Ceuster, *De Kim Utopie: Schilderijen Uit Noord-Korea*. (Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2015), 9.

I will be discussing my findings in three chapters. In the first chapter, I will examine the personality cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il by analyzing the biographies of the leaders, the characteristics of their personality cults, and the similarities and differences in the personality cults of the two leaders. In the second chapter, I will be discussing North Korean art theory on the basis of the essay 'On Fine Art' (*misullon*), which was published by the North Korean government in 1991 and supposedly written by Kim Jong Il. In the last chapter, I will conduct a visual analysis of the depiction of Kim Il Sung and the depiction of Kim Jong Il in North Korean thematic paintings on the basis of the information discussed in the previous chapters.

2. Theoretical framework

In order to conduct an analysis of the depiction of the personality cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in North Korean propaganda paintings, first one has to gain an insight into the definition of the terms ‘personality cult’ and ‘propaganda’ and the related concepts. For my theoretical framework, I will therefore provide an overview of different theories on the phenomenon of the personality cult and its definition. Since many academics include the concepts of charismatic leadership and political religion in their analysis of personality cults, I will briefly examine these two concepts as well. Furthermore, this theoretical framework will provide a definition of the term ‘propaganda’ and its supposed purpose.

2.1 Personality Cult

Despite extensive research on the phenomenon of the ‘personality cult’ across a variety of academic disciplines, academics have not been able to produce a definition of the term ‘personality cult’ on which all scholars have been able to agree. The term ‘cult of personality’ was first used in a political context by Karl Marx in a letter to Wilhelm Blos in 1877, in which he condemned the cult of personality forming around Ferdinand Lasalle, Marx’s rival inside the Communist League.³ However, the concept of personality cults surrounding political leaders can be found in a variety of times and places throughout history. The first known case of a divine cult of a living human being is the cult which surrounded the Spartan general Lysander, dating back to the 5th century BC. Personality cults further occurred around Pharaohs in Egypt, Alexander the Great, Roman emperors, Japanese emperors, Napoleon, Russian tsars, as well as in several other imperial systems, socialist regimes and totalitarian governments.⁴

In his thesis *The ABC of Sycophancy*, Adrian Teodor Popan defines the personality cult of state leaders as “quantitatively exaggerated and qualitatively extravagant public demonstration of praise of the leader,” and names overwhelming praise to the leader as the central element of a personality cult.⁵ He further argues that a personality cult is not created by the dictator himself but by individual members of the pseudo elite, and that it can only be

³ Adrian Teodor Popan, “The ABC of Sycophancy: Structural Conditions for the Emergence of Dictator’s Cults of Personality” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2015), <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/46763>, 14-15.

⁴ Anita Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929 – 1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2014), 90-91.

⁵ Popan, “The ABC of Sycophancy,” 13.

created under certain structural conditions.⁶ Other academics such as Daniel Nelson, Daniel Chirot, P. Rutland, E.A. Rees and Rossen Vassilev argue the exact opposite, considering the personality cult as an intentional strategy and the exclusive creation of the leader and/or of the ruling elite.⁷ Similarly, in his article *What is character and why it really does matter*, Thomas A. Wright describes the phenomenon of the personality cult as “the idealized, even god-like, public image of an individual *consciously shaped and molded* [emphasis added] through constant propaganda and media exposure,”⁸ perceiving it as an intentional strategy of the ruling elite. Wright’s definition of the term ‘personality cult’ concurs with that of political scientist Pao-min Chang, who defined the personality cult as “the artificial elevation of the status and authority of one man ... through the deliberate creation, projection and propagation of a godlike image.”⁹ The fact that several academics name ‘a god-like image’ as one of the defining features of a personality cult demonstrates the affiliation between the personality cult and the concept of political religion, which will be discussed further at a later point in this chapter.

Another important debate within the studies of the personality cult is about specifying the key characteristics of personality cults. According to Jan Pampller, modern day personality cults display five key characteristics: Personality cults are secular and “anchored in popular sovereignty”; they target the entire population; they use mass media, their objects are all males; and they exist where the mass media can be controlled by the government.¹⁰ However, Anita Pisch argues in her dissertation that the key characteristics of a personality cult are the elevation and glorification of an individual; a manufactured or heavily managed leader image or persona; the use of mass media; the use of symbolism and rituals; and parallels to religious phenomena.¹¹ While Pampller and Pisch agree on the importance of mass media and the management of the leader image by the government, the other key characteristics they mention differ from each other. Going even further, Popan argues that there are only two key characteristics of the personality cult that have been identified by all scholars who have studied the phenomenon: quasi-ubiquitous praise manifested through mass-media and public parades and the coercion of adulation of the leader by the government.¹² In Chapter 3, I will

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Ibid., 12 ; Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin,” 77.

⁸ Thomas A. Wright and Tyler L. Lauer, “What is Character and Why Does It Really Matter,” *Organizational Dynamics* 42 (2013): 29.

⁹ Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin,” 77.

¹⁰ Jan Pampller, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 222.

¹¹ Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin,” 77-78.

¹² Popan, “The ABC of Sycophancy,” 11.

examine the personality cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and analyze which of the characteristics mentioned above appear in the personality cults of the two leaders.

2.1.1 Charismatic Leadership

Many scholars consider the phenomenon of the personality cult to be inherently linked to the concept of charismatic leadership. Although the term ‘charisma’ has been in usage for a longer time, it has become especially associated with German sociologist Max Weber since the early twentieth century. In his essay, Weber specified a threefold ‘ideal-typical’ classification of legitimacy and power. The first type, ‘traditional’, was linked to monarchical systems of government. The second type, ‘bureaucratic’, was associated with institutions such as democracy and political parties. The third type, ‘charismatic’, focused on the emergence of exceptional, radical leaders in times of crisis. Weber defined charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers ... [that] are regarded as of divine origin”.¹³ He argued that such charismatic leaders could attract an affective community of supporters in times of crisis, but that it would be difficult for them to sustain such support.¹⁴ What is interesting about charismatic leadership is that it diverges from other forms of authority in that the leader’s influence emanates from a sense of ‘personal idiosyncratic power’, rather than from the position obtained.¹⁵ However, charismatic leadership is not solely defined by the personal qualities of the leader; it can only be sustained so long as there is a following that is oriented to the leader.¹⁶ Contrary to the notion that charisma emanates from personal idiosyncratic power, Ronald Glassman argues that charisma can be manufactured and thus does not necessarily have to derive from the personal qualities of the leader at all, especially as the charisma of a leader is now often consolidated by the representation of the leader in mass media.¹⁷

Whether genuine or manufactured, in his study of charismatic leaders Roger Eatwell has established four main traits of leader charisma. The first trait is missionary vision: charismatic leaders are driven by some form of mission, in which they tend to portray

¹³ Len Oakes, *The Charismatic Personality* (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2010), 9.

¹⁴ Roger Eatwell, “The Concept and Theory of Charismatic Leadership,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 2 (2006): 141.

¹⁵ Carol Strong and Matt Killingsworth, “Stalin the Charismatic Leader?: Explaining the ‘Cult of Personality’ as a Legitimation Technique,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 12, no. 4 (2011): 394.

¹⁶ Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin,” 58.

¹⁷ Strong and Killingsworth, “Stalin the Charismatic Leader?,” 399.

themselves as the creators of radical new movements. The second trait Eatwell identifies is symbiotic hierarchy: charismatic leaders at times portray themselves as ordinary men, merely obeying the wishes of the people. The third trait is Manichean demonization: the targeting and demonization of an enemy, the 'Other'. The last trait Eatwell describes is 'personal presence': charismatic leaders typically have great personal presence, or 'magnetism'. Personal presence can be exuded through physical traits, but also because of confidence or well-informed views. Eatwell notes that in some cases, this 'presence' of the leader was almost totally manufactured.¹⁸

The terms 'personality cult' and 'charismatic leadership' are often viewed as an intertwined concept by scholars. Generally, several aspects of the concept of charismatic leadership can be identified within personality cults surrounding leaders.

2.1.2 Political religion

The term 'political religion' and its relation to personality cults has been widely debated among academics for several decades. First use of the term 'political religion' dates back to the time of the French Revolution. However, it was only after it became associated with Bolshevism, fascism and Nazism that the concept of political religion became more prominent. The term was employed to describe the phenomena of the absolute elevation of the ruling party and the state, the cult of the leader, mass fanaticism, and rites and symbols of collective liturgies, which were all fundamental aspects of the aforementioned totalitarian regimes. Even though the term 'political religion' was employed as pertaining to these aspects of totalitarian regimes in the early to mid 1900s, scholars of the present day are still debating about the definition of 'political religion' and the limits of the concept of the term. Many academics disagree with the usage of the concept of political religion, arguing that the term 'religion' should not be applied to totalitarian political movements which contain no real form of religiousness and which merely use metaphors, symbols and rituals of a religious kind for political purposes. In his article *Political Religion: A Concept and Its Critics – A Critical Survey*, Emilio Gentile also renounces the use of the term 'political religion' and other similar terms such as 'civil religion' or 'secular religion'. He argues that academics should use a more general term to refer to the historical phenomenon around these types of political systems, namely the 'sacrilization of politics'. Gentile states that the term 'sacrilization of politics' refers to the phenomenon of a political entity, such as the state or the party, assuming

¹⁸ Eatwell, "The Concept and Theory," 144-148.

the characteristics of a sacred entity: a supreme power which becomes the object of faith, of cult, and of fidelity and devotion from the side of the citizens; and as such becomes the centre of a system of beliefs, myths, rites and symbols.¹⁹

This thesis agrees that the term ‘religion’ should not be applied to political movements, and thus the concept of ‘political religion’ will not be utilized in the examination of the personality cults surrounding Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.

2.2 Propaganda

Many academics have attempted to define the term ‘propaganda’, but definitions can vary considerably depending on the person defining it, their political viewpoint, and the time in which that person lives. Nowadays, many people interpret ‘propaganda’ as a term with negative connotations because of associations with totalitarian regimes which make extensive use of propaganda, but originally ‘propaganda’ was a neutral term for the dissemination of information for any given cause. Anita Pisch describes the most basic meaning of the term ‘propaganda’ as “the manipulation and employment of language and symbols in the service of an ideological or social purpose.”²⁰ Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell defined ‘propaganda’ as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”²¹ Richard Nelson gives a more extensive description, defining ‘propaganda’ as “a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels.”²² In this thesis, I will be applying Nelson’s definition of propaganda for several reasons. Firstly, Nelson is the only person who specifies that propaganda is transmitted via mass and direct media channels. Secondly, Nelson describes the phenomenon of propaganda as attempting to *influence* the public, rather than calling it an effort at manipulation as both Pisch and Jowett and O’Donnell do in their definition. Thirdly, unlike Pisch and Jowett and O’Donnell, Nelson’s definition of ‘propaganda’ stipulates that propaganda is meant for a specified target audience.

¹⁹ Emilio Gentile and George Staunton, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 25-29.

²⁰ Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin,” 52.

²¹ Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 7.

²² Richard Alan Nelson, *A Chronology and Glossary of Propaganda in the United States*, (Westport: Greenwood press, 1996), 232–233.

3. Methodology

In order to conduct an analysis the depiction of the North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and their personality cults in thematic paintings, I will utilize a combination of semiotics and iconography as a methodology. Both semiotics and iconography are methodologies often used within the discipline of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies is a field that studies the forms and practices of culture, the relationship between forms and practices of culture and social groups and the subsequent power relations between different social groups. The term ‘culture’ in this context does not just mean art or high culture, but everyday symbolic and expressive practices that take place in our daily lives. The field of Cultural Studies pursues to understand the connection between cultural production, consumption, belief and meaning and social processes and institutions. Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field which appropriates and re-purposes components of theoretical frameworks and methodologies from other disciplines, which makes it difficult to identify a singular set of disciplinary protocols for the field. However, most research within the framework of Cultural Studies includes elements of semiotic, ethnographic, sociological, psychoanalytic and critical textual methods.²³ Cultural Studies has recently developed a specific sub-field of visual cultural studies, which concerns itself with all forms of visual information, its meanings, and the way visual information is consumed. The sub-field of visual cultural studies analyzes all visual technologies, from oil painting to the Internet.²⁴

The field of Cultural Studies often utilizes semiotic theory to analyze visual information. Semiotics is the study of signs; a sign being anything that can be used to signify something else.²⁵ Ellen Seiter defined semiotics as “the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more. The field of semiotics examines the way such ‘signs’ communicate and what guidelines are applied for their use.”²⁶ There are two “founding fathers” of the theory of semiotics: the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. The concept of semiotics was first coined by Ferdinand de Saussure in 1916, even though he called it ‘semiology’. He described semiology as “a science that studies the

²³ Theo van Leeuwen and Cary Jewitt, *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2001), 61-63.

²⁴ Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, *Handbook*, 2.

²⁵ Arthur Berger, “Semiotics and Society,” *Society* 51, no. 1 (2014), 22.

²⁶ Ellen Seiter, “Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen (London: Routledge, 2nd ed., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 31.

life of signs within society ... [and] would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them.”²⁷ Saussure divided signs into two parts: the signifiers and the signified. A signifier is a sound pattern, and the signified is the mental concept generated by the signifier. Saussure argued that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and based on collective conventions, and thus the signified can change in meaning over time.²⁸ Although Saussure laid the groundwork for the theory of semiotics, his theory has been criticized for only focusing on linguistic expressions and not taking the workings of other types of signs into account.²⁹ The second founding father of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, wrote that a sign “is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”³⁰, emphasizing the role of the interpreter of signs. Furthermore, he argued that there are three kinds of signs: icons, indexes and symbols. Icons are signs that signify by resemblance, such as a photograph. Indexes are signs that signify by cause and effect, such as smoke coming from a house signifying fire. Symbols are signs that signify on the basis of social conventions, such as flags: people first have to be taught what a flag signifies before they can recognize it as a sign of something else. Putting a heavier focus on visual semiotics, Roland Barthes introduced the idea of the layering of the meaning of signs. The first layer is the layer of denotation: the simple depiction of something or someone. The second layer is the layer of connotation: the relation of the image to ideas, values and other meanings which are expressed through what is represented. Barthes argues that denotation is not always entirely up to the beholder; rather, denotation can be formed by the societal context and the intended message of an image or text by the producer.³¹ Semiotics establishes not only how to find the meaning of signs but also that these meanings are based on societal conventions; society creates meaning in signs and the meaning of a sign can change over time.³² The aforementioned theories about semiotics by Saussure, Peirce and Barthes provide some basic concepts that enable scholars to analyze phenomena from a semiotic perspective.

Besides semiotics, this thesis will also utilize iconography for its visual analysis of North Korean thematic paintings which depict the two leaders. Iconography uses textual analysis and contextual research to support its interpretations of visual information. It distinguishes three layers of pictorial meaning: representational meaning, iconographical

²⁷ Berger, “Semiotics and Society,” 22.

²⁸ Ibid., 22.

²⁹ Florian Schneider, “A Rough Guide to the Theory of Semiotics,” *Politics East Asia*, Published 01-07-2013, accessed 01-12-2017, <http://www.politicseastasia.com/studying/guide-to-the-theory-of-semiotics/>.

³⁰ Berger, “Semiotics and Society,” 23.

³¹ Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, *Handbook*, 93-95.

³² Berger, “Semiotics and Society,” 26.

symbolism and iconological symbolism. The idea of ‘representational meaning’ is close to that of ‘denotation’ in semiotics: it is the recognition of what is represented on the basis of our practical experience. Just like with ‘denotation’, ‘representational meaning’ does not include the understanding of the associated conventional meanings of what is represented. Conventional meanings associated with a particular person, thing or place are studied when analyzing ‘iconographical symbolism’. Lastly, ‘iconological symbolism’ is what could be called ideological meaning. To analyze it is, in Panofsky’s words, to “ascertain those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion.”³³

Within iconography, representational meaning can often be identified in five ways according to Hermeren (1969). Firstly, a written title or caption can indicate who or what is represented in the work. Secondly, who or what is represented can be identified on the basis of personal experience: through objects, buildings or landscapes which are recognizable. Thirdly, contextual research can be undertaken to establish who or what is portrayed in a work. Fourthly, the identity of people, places or objects can be established on the basis of similar representations in other pictures. Lastly, representational meaning can be identified on the basis of textual descriptions in mythological or other literature. As for iconographical symbolism, Hermeren argued that there are four visual ‘pointers’ which indicate that a motif should be interpreted symbolically. The first pointer is when the symbolic motif is represented with more care and detail than in other similar works, or it is prominently displayed in the picture by the use of placing, lighting, colour et cetera. A second visual pointer is when a character in the picture points at the motif with an expressive gesture. Two other pointers are the motif seeming out of place in the picture or the presence of the motif somehow contradicting the laws of nature.³⁴ The third layer of pictorial meaning, iconological symbolism, is identified by interpreting the work on the basis of contextual research, such as the biography of the artist or author.³⁵

In this thesis, I will utilize the basis of semiotics and iconography presented in this chapter in combination with research about the personality cults of the two leaders and North Korean art theory in order to conduct a visual analysis of the depiction of the personality cults of the leaders in North Korean thematic paintings.

³³ Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, *Handbook*, 100-102.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

4. The Personality Cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il

In this chapter, I will discuss the personality cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. I will do so by analyzing the biographies of the leaders, the characteristics of their personality cults, and the similarities and differences in the personality cults of the two leaders.

4.1 The Personality Cult of Kim Il Sung

Kim Il Sung was born on April 15, 1912 in the village of Mangyongdae under the name of Kim Song Ju. During the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula, Kim's family decided to move to a region in China that the Japanese had not taken possession of yet. There Kim became a member of the Chinese Communist Party in 1931 and joined the guerrilla warfare against Japan. It was at this point that he decided to change his name from Kim Song Ju to Kim Il Sung. Thanks to his leadership qualities, Kim soon had command of his own small group of fighters. Most of the men serving under Kim were Korean, and later North Korean propagandists would refer to the guerrilla group as the Korean People's Revolutionary Army.³⁶ In reality, the 'KPRA' was known as the Second Army Corps of a Chinese communist-led force that was called at first the Northeast People's Revolutionary Army, and became known by the name of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army starting from 1936. The units Kim actually led in battle rarely numbered more than a few hundred men.³⁷ In 1941, Kim and his guerrilla unit took refuge in Russia, where they settled in a Soviet army camp outside the village of Vyatskoye near the city of Khabarovsk. There he remained for the rest of the war, undergoing Soviet military training and marrying Kim Jong-suk, the Korean woman who headed the seamstress detachment of his guerrilla unit. Their first son, Yura, later to be known as Kim Jong-Il, was born on February 16 in 1942.³⁸ Kim only returned to Korea in late September 1945, accompanied by the Soviet army. According to North Korean propaganda, however, Kim Il Sung was the revolutionary leader of the entire anti-Japanese resistance in Manchuria, who continued fighting until the liberation of the Korean peninsula in 1945.³⁹

Starting from October 1945, Soviet occupation officials promoted Kim Il Sung as the

³⁶ Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 19.

³⁷ Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 40.

³⁸ Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People*, 20.

³⁹ Michael E. Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 155.

prospective Korean leader and gradually placed Kim in leading party positions and provisional governing structures.⁴⁰ According to Bruce Cumings, the basic themes of Kim's personality cult began to be developed in 1946 by the Soviets, who orchestrated his personality cult so as to transform Kim into a heroic anti-Japanese military general to enhance his political legitimacy.⁴¹ On September 10, 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established, with Kim Il-Sung as the prime minister.⁴² In 1950, Kim had convinced the Soviet Union and China to support him in launching the Korean War, which ultimately served to solidify Kim Il-Sung's legitimacy as a military general and his grip on political power. Although he had become the prime minister of the DPRK, there was still opposition within the Korean Workers' Party, which resulted in an intra-communist struggle for power in North Korea in the 1950s. Kim successfully eliminated the opposition, and went on to transform the KWP from a broad representative party of the Korean communist movement to a narrow party led by his guerrilla group. The KWP became an instrument for carrying out the instructions of the Great Leader. This was when the North Korean system shifted from a Soviet-sponsored state to one of greater autonomy.⁴³ In 1955, Kim Il Sung introduced the concept of 'Juche' in a speech to an audience of propaganda officials of the North Korean Communist Party. 'Juche', also called 'Kimilsungism' in North Korea, is a policy of autonomy which maintains four main principles: Autonomy in ideology, independence in politics, self-sustenance in economy, and self-defense in national defense.⁴⁴ Kim introduced Juche as a ruling ideology as a result of disagreements with its communist allies, the Soviet Union and China, about the resumption of armed conflict with South Korea. The Juche ideology was created in an effort to deemphasize the importance of external assistance for the establishment of North Korea as a country, and especially for the appointment of Kim Il Sung as the leader of the country. As a result of this policy, the DPRK started removing all mention of the roles of the Soviets and the Chinese in the liberation of Korea and the establishment of the DPRK.⁴⁵ Juche thought was presented as the highest and most up-to-date brand of progressive ideology worldwide, inherently superior to Marxism-Leninism.⁴⁶ By 1972, Kim Il Sung had assumed a position of supreme power, and was regarded as the Party's only

⁴⁰ Kyung Moon Hwang, *A History of Korea* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 216.

⁴¹ Jae Cheon Lim, *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea* (Taylor and Francis, 2015), 21.

⁴² Martin, *Under the Loving Care*, 62.

⁴³ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 219.

⁴⁴ Ho Min Yang, "The Personality Cult of Kim Il-Song as a Strategy for National Unification," *The Journal of Asiatic Studies* 13, no. 4 (1970), 325.

⁴⁵ Martin, *Under the Loving Care*, 109.

⁴⁶ Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67.

approved ideologue and theorist.⁴⁷

Initially, the personality cult of Kim Il Sung was patterned on the cults of Mao and Stalin, but by the early 1970s it began displaying characteristics that were unprecedented in other personality cults the modern world.⁴⁸ Armstrong notes that North Korea's early revolutionary politics "combined images of Confucian familialism with Stalinism," of which the virtue of collective filial piety toward Kim Il Sung was the most distinctive element.⁴⁹ North Korean propagandists began promulgating the theory that the people, defined by communist doctrine as all-powerful, nevertheless cannot function properly without being united under the leadership of a superior being. In other words, while the people are the 'body' of the nation, they need a leader to be the 'brain'. Subsequently, Kim Il Sung and the Party were propagandized as "the brain, heart, wisdom and conscience of all the Korean people."⁵⁰ North Koreans are taught that throughout the nation's history the outside world has consistently brought them harm, and the revolutionary leader Kim Il Sung is the only one able to protect them from it. In this manner, propagandists have sought to instill a dependency on Kim into the people by equating him with the fate of Korean civilization itself.⁵¹ B.R. Meyers attests that the people of North Korea have been led to believe that they "are too pure-blooded, and so too virtuous, to survive in this evil world without a great parental leader."⁵² The image of the 'great parental leader' is but one of many images North Korean propagandists have promulgated to reinforce Kim Il Sung legitimacy. Kim Il Sung is represented in North Korean propaganda as a military genius, a revolutionary leader, an emancipator, a benevolent father, a philosopher and theorist, a life-giving authority, an institutional founder and sometimes even as omniscient.⁵³ State propaganda has referred to Kim as "superior to Christ in love, Buddha in benevolence, Confucius in virtue, and Mohammed in justice."⁵⁴ These various images of the Great Leader bear resemblance to the images that were propagated in the personality cult of Stalin and Mao, who were similarly depicted as the leader of the people, the people's teacher, the benevolent father of the people, the builder of communism, and the great

⁴⁷ Adrian Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea*, 2nd ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 115-119.

⁴⁸ Lankov, *The Real North Korea*, 50.

⁴⁹ Heon-ik Kwon and Byung Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 18.

⁵⁰ Martin, *Under the Loving Care*, 106.

⁵¹ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 221.

⁵² Bryan R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 59.

⁵³ David Allen Hatch, "The Cult of Personality of Kim Il-Song: Functional Analysis of a State Myth" (PhD diss., The American University, 1986), 232-253 ; Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 78-87.

⁵⁴ Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea – Past and Future* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 73.

soldier.⁵⁵ Kim Il Sung is additionally regularly referred to as the Sun of the Nation. The sun was also one of the key symbols associated with Stalin in Soviet propaganda. According to Anita Pisch, associating a leader with the sun suggests that he is the bringer of life and of bounty to the people.⁵⁶ In the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, the symbol of the sun is accompanied by other images of natural forces, such as blizzards, fire, mountains and bodies of water. By consistently depicting the leader with such nature images, North Korean propaganda represented Kim Il Sung as a force transcending human affairs.⁵⁷ Every novel, painting, film and performance, regardless of its motif, background, theme or characters, has to have the Great Leader at its core. This is what is called *chongja* or the seed of the story in North Korean literary theory.⁵⁸ In many North Korean propaganda works, several of the aforementioned images of the Great Leader are portrayed at once.

Many academics have argued that the North Korean concept of the leader as the father of the people is a remnant of Korea's Confucian tradition, in which filial piety is expected from the people in return for their safety and the loving care of their leader.⁵⁹ South Korean anthropologist Lee Moon-Woong defines North Korea's political system as a "family state," arguing that "the ties between the masses and their supreme leader are very much like kinship relations."⁶⁰ Furthermore, North Korea is additionally a 'family state' in another manner: it is the only country in which the personality cult of the leader extends to the leader's family. North Korean propaganda establishes Kim Il Sung's family – his parents, uncle, wife and children – as leaders of a continuous Korean resistance to the appropriation of the fatherland by foreign forces.⁶¹ Official propaganda establishes that the Kim family has played a major role in the last 150 years of Korean history. In this manner, North Korean propaganda has instilled the idea that Korean patriotism is embodied in the Kim family from generation to generation. The family cult has served to establish Kim Il Sung's credentials as a revolutionary leader and to secure the smooth succession of Kim Jong Il.⁶²

⁵⁵ Pampler, *The Stalin Cult*, 193 ; Jane Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 25.

⁵⁶ Pisch, "The Personality Cult of Stalin," 210.

⁵⁷ Suk Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 150-153.

⁵⁸ Sonia Ryang, *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 61.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, 157.

⁶⁰ Kwon and Chung, *Beyond Charismatic Politics*, 18.

⁶¹ Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, 155.

⁶² Lankov, *The Real North Korea*, 52.

4.2 The Personality Cult of Kim Jong Il

According to the official North Korean history, Kim Jong Il was born on February 16, 1942 in a secret military camp on Mount Paektu, where his father's guerrilla band was allegedly based. His birth was said to be foretold by a swallow, and to have been celebrated by the heavens with a double rainbow and the appearance of a new star in the night sky. In reality, Kim Jong Il was born under the name Yura in the village of Vyatskoye.⁶³ He entered Korea in November 1945, when he was three years old.⁶⁴ The personality cult of Kim Jong Il started developing in the early 1970s, when Kim Il Sung began preparing him as his successor. He attained several positions within the North Korean government (Politburo, Organization and Guidance Department) and was soon being referred to as the "party center" by North Korean propaganda.⁶⁵ By the mid-1970s, Kim Jong Il's portrait started to appear in public places paired with his father's ubiquitous image. At the 1980 Party Congress, his position as the successor was cemented when he became a member of the presidium of the party Politburo.⁶⁶ For the first time, the North Korean media referred to him by name, and North Korean officials began to refer openly to him as his father's designated successor.⁶⁷ It appears that Kim Jong Il ran most of North Korea's domestic affairs from about 1980 onward.⁶⁸ As his rise in the government progressed, a cult of personality began to form around the younger Kim, featuring songs of loyalty and study sessions on his writings. Kim Jong Il was promoted as a 'model revolutionary' who would consolidate the ideology of his father's generation and forestall any attempts at revisionism by the younger generation.⁶⁹ In the years that followed his ideological works were accorded the reverent, canonical status previously reserved for his father.⁷⁰ Even though North Korean propaganda called him "a military genius who has boundless military insights, limitless boldness, extensive military knowledge, and political insights,"⁷¹ Kim Jong Il's relative youth and lack of military service made gaining control of the army his most difficult task. By 1991, however, he had become 'Marshall' and Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army (KPA).⁷² In 1993, he succeeded his father as chairman of the National Defense Committee (NDC). When Kim Il Sung died on July 8, 1994,

⁶³ Cha, *The Impossible State*, 82.

⁶⁴ Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People*, 24.

⁶⁵ Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, 157-158.

⁶⁶ Cha, *The Impossible State*, 87.

⁶⁷ Buzo, *Making of Modern Korea*, 139.

⁶⁸ Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People*, 25.

⁶⁹ Buzo, *Making of Modern Korea*, 120.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷¹ Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People*, 26.

⁷² Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, 158.

the country entered a traditional mourning period of three years, in which a smooth transfer of full power to Kim Jong Il took place. When the mourning period ended in 1997, Kim Jong Il was appointed to his father's position as general secretary of the KWP. In 1998, the Supreme People's Assembly adopted a new constitution that retired the position of president, thereby making Kim Il Sung North Korea's 'eternal president,' and designated the chairman of the NDC, a post held by Kim Jong Il since 1993, head of state.

Once in power, it became clear that Kim Jong Il did not intend to change the political system set in place by his father. But with his father gone, Kim had to do some additional work to consolidate his political position. To this end, he placed great emphasis on the military as his main source of support and the 'pillar' of North Korean society.⁷³ His preferred official title was that of the military's supreme commander, and after taking power he was commonly referred to as 'The General', despite having no military background. His public proclamation of a 'Military First' (*songun*) state policy beginning in the 1990s appeared as a tactic to ensure the support of the military.⁷⁴ Today *songun* politics is one of the fundamental defining features of North Korean life.⁷⁵ Kim Jong Il's lack of military experience has not prevented the North Korean propagandists from making him out to be a war hero. According to North Korean propaganda, Kim has played a very active part in North Korea's long-running cold war with the United States.⁷⁶ In addition to fabricating a military background for Kim Jong Il, the Department of Propaganda and Agitation aimed to further enhance his image as not only the rightful leader of North Korea, but as an extension of his father.⁷⁷ Kim Jong Il's images are usually portrayed so that he is the Great Leader's 'successor.'⁷⁸ This image-making as the 'successor' to the previous leader bears resemblance to the personality cult of Stalin, who also used Lenin's legacy as a legitimation technique for his own leadership.⁷⁹ The two most important images in the personality cult of Kim Jong Il are those of him as the great successor of the Great Leader, and his image as the leader of the Military First policy. For his image as the loyal successor, Kim Jong Il is portrayed as the successor of Kim Il Sung's thoughts, his revolutionary tradition, and his family heritage. His image as the military-first leader is mainly constructed as masculine and charismatic, contrasting his image as a

⁷³ Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People*, 26-27.

⁷⁴ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 253.

⁷⁵ Cha, *The Impossible State*, 92.

⁷⁶ Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People*, 56.

⁷⁷ Jerrold Post, Douglas Krisner and Mike Richards, "Kim Jong Il of North Korea: In the Shadow of his Father," *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008), 197-198.

⁷⁸ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 90.

⁷⁹ Strong and Killingsworth, "Stalin the Charismatic Leader?," 410.

feminine, benevolent parent.⁸⁰ Similarly to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il is often referred to as the ‘nerve center,’ the ‘supreme brain,’ and the ‘heart’ of the North Korean people, as well as their parental figure.⁸¹ Although the phrase ‘Parent Leader’ still refers only to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il is often referred to as the ‘mother’ of the people and the Party. Similarly, the honorific ‘Great Leader’ was reserved for Kim Il Sung, whereas Kim Jong Il was referred to as ‘Dear Leader’. Another difference in the imagery of the two leaders is that while Kim Il Sung was referred to as the sun of the nation, Kim Jong Il is regularly referred to as the star. Both leaders were proclaimed to embody Korean virtues and therefore to be the greatest man alive.⁸² Through their long-standing personality cults, the state elevated the two Kims to the level of demigods. After his father’s death, Kim Jong Il declared a new calendar, in which Year Zero is 1912, the birthyear of Kim Il Sung. April 15, the birthday of Kim Il Sung, was also elevated to a national holiday akin to Christmas in North Korea.⁸³

While developing the cults, the state has produced and reproduced a myriad of leader symbols.⁸⁴ An example of such a leader symbol are the Kimilsungia and the Kimjongilia, two types of flowers which were dedicated to the two leaders and are often displayed during state events, as well as in propaganda paintings.⁸⁵ The personality cults of the two leaders were further reinforced by the erection of enormous monuments celebrating the system, its ideology, and especially its leaders.⁸⁶ The personality cults of the two North Korean leaders are essential parts of people’s daily activity, critically affecting the North Korean people’s minds and emotions.⁸⁷ As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, and later Kim Jong Il, included the idolization of the entire Kim family. According to the bloodline (*hyoltong*) principle which was elaborated in the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, a great family produces heroes, and a hero who is born into a great family is destined to be a leader because the family’s greatness is transmitted to its descendants through its bloodline.⁸⁸ This principle not only reinforced the political legitimacy of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, but also that of generations to follow. Indeed, shortly after Kim Jong Il’s birthday in 2002, *Rodong Sinmun* published a long editorial about how the final victory of the Revolution

⁸⁰ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 90-93.

⁸¹ Hassig and Oh, *The Hidden People*, 58.

⁸² Megan L. Gill, “North Korea: The Role of Propaganda in the Sustainability of the Kim Regime” (Master’s thesis, Georgetown University, 2012), 47-51.

⁸³ Cha, *The Impossible State*, 91.

⁸⁴ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸⁶ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 266.

⁸⁷ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

needed to be multigenerational – if it could not be accomplished by the Father, then it would be accomplished by the Son, and if not by the Son, then by the next generation.⁸⁹

In the next chapter, I will be conducting a visual analysis of the depiction of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in North Korean thematic paintings in order to determine how these paintings reflect the personality cults of the two leaders.

⁸⁹ Cha, *The Impossible State*, 96.

5. North Korean Art Theory

One cannot analyze North Korean propaganda art without taking into consideration the nation's own theories and constructs of interpretation about its national art. In this chapter, I will be discussing North Korean art theory on the basis of the essay 'On Fine Art' (*misullon*), which was published by the North Korean government in 1991 and supposedly written by Kim Jong Il. In doing so, I will discuss the theory of Juche Realism, after which I will analyze the characteristics of Juche Realism. Lastly, I will examine the genre of 'thematic painting' (*chujehwa*), within which I will be conducting my visual analysis.

5.1 The Theory of Juche Realism

After the introduction of Juche thought by Kim Il Sung in 1955, Juche thought started appearing in every aspect of life in North Korean society. After 1967, it also became prevalent in the arts, and in 1975 the 'Juche literary theory' was presented. Juche literary theory argues that the qualities of the Party, the worker's class and the people, as well as the theory of the 'seed' of the story, have to be represented in all works of art in any form or manner.⁹⁰ Juche theory for the visual arts was elaborated in the essay 'On Fine Art' (*misullon*), which was published by the North Korean government in 1991 and supposedly authored by Kim Jong Il. Since the authorship of the essay was attributed to Kim Jong Il, 'On Fine Art' acquired the status of a dogma in North Korea, and it is still considered the most important theoretical reference for North Korean visual arts to this day.⁹¹

In his essay 'On Fine Art', Kim Jong Il describes Juche fine art as "a revolutionary and popular art which is national in form and socialist in content; ... in which ideological content and artistic skill are in complete unity." He further argues that Juche fine art should reflect the requirements of the period and the aspirations of the masses and serve them.⁹² This means that fine art should be accessible to the North Korean people: what is depicted should be instantly recognizable to them.⁹³ For this reason, Kim condemned the use of abstract art such as Impressionism, Cubism and Expressionism, and declared Juche Realism as the

⁹⁰ 미레박, "북한 주체미술의 수령형상화에 관한 연구," *남북문화예술연구* 4, no. 6 (2009): 75-80.

⁹¹ Tupan and de Ceuster, *De Kim Utopie*, 31.

⁹² Jong Il Kim, *On Fine Art: October 16, 1991* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991), 1, <http://www.korean-books.com.kp/en/search/?page=all&keyword=fine%20art> .

⁹³ Tupan and de Ceuster, *De Kim Utopie*, 31.

national art form.⁹⁴ ‘Realism’ is a creative method which regards it as its basic principle to depict real life objectively and truthfully in works of art.⁹⁵ Showing human life and reflecting the requirements of this life, as well as encouraging people to aspire to a nobler life, are the essential characteristics of all progressive and revolutionary fine art.⁹⁶ Kim’s idea of developing art which is national in form and socialist in content was paraphrased from Stalin’s definition of Socialist Realism, and many aspects of Socialist Realism are distinguishable in the theory of Juche Realism.⁹⁷ The most exact definition of Socialist Realism was given in a statute of the Union of Soviet Writers: “Socialist Realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism.”⁹⁸ Furthermore, Khrushchev stated in 1957 that “the highest social destiny of art and literature is to mobilize the people to the struggle for new advances in the building of Communism.”⁹⁹ These statements about Socialist Realism concur with the statements Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have made about Juche Realism. Socialist fine art in general embodies loyalty to the Party, the working class and the people.¹⁰⁰

In ‘On Fine Art’, Kim Jong Il claims that the standard of beauty in Juche art theory is dependent on the aspirations of the people, and what is ‘beautiful’ means those objects and phenomena which meet man’s desire for independence.¹⁰¹ In North Korean art theory, there is no recognition of beauty without the human being.¹⁰² Kim describes man as “the most beautiful and powerful being in the world.” However, this does not mean that all men are inherently beautiful: Kim argues that a man who is not noble mentally and morally cannot look beautiful, however handsome his appearance. He claims that man’s beauty finds expression in his ideological and mental qualities, the main content of which is ideological awareness. It is ideological beauty which determines man’s aesthetic value. Therefore, a central element of Juche fine art is the depiction of the archetypal noble, independent man

⁹⁴ Portal, *Art Under Control*, 20.

⁹⁵ Kim, *On Fine Art*, 33.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹⁷ Portal, *Art Under Control*, 27.

⁹⁸ Abram Terc, George Dennis and Czeslaw Milosz, *On Socialist Realism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 24.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ Kim, *On Fine Art*, 19.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 3-7.

¹⁰² Alzo David-West, “North Korean Aesthetic Theory: Aesthetics, Beauty and “Man”,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 47, no. 1 (2013): 106.

who displays unfailing loyalty to the Party and the leader. Juche fine art has a great informative and educational function, as well as a great aesthetic and emotional function.¹⁰³ It has the task of inspiring the masses to be emotionally, intellectually, morally and politically committed to the Party and the state. German philosopher Friedrich von Schiller described this phenomenon within the arts as the “aesthetic education of man.”¹⁰⁴ The relationship between art and reality is twofold: reality is reflected in art, but art also exerts an active effect upon that reality. By endorsing the new features of society as it progresses toward communism, the artist assists the masses in understanding, supporting and assimilating these features into their social, moral and aesthetic attitudes.¹⁰⁵

5.2 The Characteristics of Juche Realism

In ‘On Fine Art’, Kim Jong Il elaborately describes the qualities a work of art should possess in order to be considered as a Juche Realist artwork. He does so by discussing the techniques to be used when creating a work of art and what the content of a work of art should entail. The consistent policy of the Party is to give full precedence to Korean painting (*chosonhwa*) over all other forms of visual art. Korean painting uses ink and rice paper instead of oil and canvas. Kim states that fine art must be developed with an emphasis on Korean painting and other forms of visual arts, such as oil paintings, should be developed with Korean painting as a basis. He dictates that full use must be made of such methods of expression as symmetry, balance, unity, variation, proportion, measurement, repetition and rhythm, and that objects should be drawn in a three-dimensional way by utilizing contours, tones, colors and space. According to Kim, Koreans tend to be fond of light, soft, vivid and deep colors, and therefore the aesthetic tastes of the present period are best expressed in bright, brilliant colors.¹⁰⁶

In *On Fine Art*, Kim argues that the most important characteristics of fine art are the condensation and concentration of artistic depiction. Works of art should depict an event in depth from various aspects, but without over-extending the storyline. This is the requirement of artistic generalization, which enables people to fathom one hundred things by observing one work of art.¹⁰⁷ Kim further asserts that in artistic works, typical life should be represented. Life becomes typical when it contains the characteristic features of the given period and the

¹⁰³ Kim, *On Fine Art*, 1-18.

¹⁰⁴ David-West, “North Korean Aesthetic Theory,” 109.

¹⁰⁵ Caradog Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 89-91.

¹⁰⁶ Kim, *On Fine Art*, 67-97.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

essence of the corresponding society in various spheres of people's life – political, economic and cultural.¹⁰⁸ By utilizing typification to portray characters and scenes from life, Juche fine art is meant to enable the viewers to think of their past and future lives through one picture.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, choosing the right situation to depict is of great importance. The moment which clearly reveals the essence of an event or fact should be chosen as the moment of life to be depicted. A work of art does not necessarily have to depict the climax of the development of certain events. The moment depicted may be a particular stage in the process of the development of events, the moment of transition from one state of motion to the next, or the time after the conclusion of an event.¹¹⁰

Socialist fine art is distinguished from the fine art of preceding class societies in that it mainly depicts the masses of the people and creates model communists who emerge from among them. Socialist fine art mainly portrays workers, peasants and other working people, and presents them as the most powerful and noble beings. According to North Korean art theory, in a work of art there should always be a hero in the form of an archetypal Juche man as a main character. Oftentimes, the person portrayed as the main character is the leader, who is depicted as the guiding intellect of the working masses and the centre of their unity and cohesion. Hence, for socialist fine art, nothing is more honorable than portraying the leader well. The portrayal of the leader constitutes the essence, or 'seed', of the content of socialist fine art.¹¹¹

Besides condensation and concentration, the composition of an artwork is considered as an important aspect of fine art. 'Composition' is a process within fine arts which arranges the representational components of a work so that they form a harmonious whole. The composition should aim at implying something instead of interpreting it, and enable the viewers to think about something through what is represented. An important aspect of composition is to select the position of the hero correctly and make the hero the centre of the artwork. The central position of a work of art does not necessarily have to be the geometric centre, but it is always the centre in terms of the content of a work. The depiction of the hero has to catch the eye of the viewer at first glance when they observe a work of art. The movement of the hero and other characters is determined by the aim of their action. Kim condemns unnecessarily placing a character in a picture if the character does not have a representational task or if their task is not clear. The characters should be placed in such a

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

way that each of them is distinctive, but they do not distract the attention of the viewer from the centre of the picture.¹¹² When representing characters in North Korean art, it is imperative that artists express the sentiments and thoughts of the characters correctly.¹¹³ The situation in which characters are depicted is a very important factor in revealing the disposition of the characters. People naturally react differently depending on the situation in which they are placed. People can react with a variety of facial expressions and behavior even when approaching the same things and phenomena because they maintain different dispositions.¹¹⁴ Therefore, one of the rules of North Korean art theory is that the artist should accurately depict the interaction between the characters which are portrayed.¹¹⁵ Man's psychological state is expressed in fine art not only through his face but also through other parts of his body, particularly his hands. Realistic artists utilize a variety of techniques for expressing the personalities of characters through such things as their movements, postures, facial expressions and living environments.¹¹⁶

5.3 Thematic Painting

Artistic forms such as films and novels can describe life in various aspects by depicting several situations and themes in one work of art. Fine art, however, deals with only one theme and one related situation because it can only show one particular aspect of life. In *On Fine Art*, Kim encourages artists to continuously expand the themes within fine art and produce a large number of works with a variety of content, as long as they contribute to the revolutionary cause. He further recommends six main themes which should be prevalent in works of art. The most important theme in fine art is the greatness of the leader. Artists have to depict the leader as a great thinker, statesman and strategist, and as a great man overall. Works of art should have the image of the great leader at the centre, always represent him as being among the people and depict his image in a similar way for each period. Another important theme in fine art is the greatness of the Party. Artists should accurately depict the Party's decisive role in the revolution and the wisdom of the leadership of the Party. Fine art should also represent the country as a people-centered socialist country and a genuine homeland of the people in order to encourage the people to ardently love the country with national pride and self-confidence, and to strive for its prosperity and development. Kim also encourages creating

¹¹² Ibid., 67-73.

¹¹³ Ibid., 44.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹¹⁵ Tupan and de Ceuster, *De Kim Utopie*, 24.

¹¹⁶ Kim, *On Fine Art*, 52-56.

works dealing with national reunification, stating that artists should depict the struggle of the Korean people to drive out foreign forces and reunify the country. Another theme to be used in North Korean fine art is the subject of the Fatherland Liberation War and class education. This particular theme should encourage the North Korean people to gain an understanding of the so-called “aggressive nature of imperialism” and enhance their hatred toward “the exploiter classes”. Lastly, the life of the soldiers of the KPA and the relation between the army and the people is named as an important theme to depict in fine art.¹¹⁷ Paintings which adhere to these six themes are called ‘thematic paintings’ (*chujehwa*). These political ‘thematic paintings’ comprise an essential genre of painting within North Korean art theory.¹¹⁸

The genre of thematic painting in North Korean art theory bears a strong resemblance to the genre of history painting, a popular art form from the early Renaissance to the 19th century. History painting is a form of narrative painting depicting several characters enacting a scene which is normally drawn from classical history, mythology or the Bible.¹¹⁹ A significant moment or action in the story is chosen to be depicted in the painting, subsequently suggesting the immediate antecedents and consequences of the action depicted. The painting usually focuses on one protagonist, surrounded by secondary characters who are often positioned in a circle around the main character and are looking at him to emphasize his importance. The primary goal of the painting is to clearly depict a certain disposition or emotion, shown in the facial expression of the main character. The clothes and attributes of the characters signify their function, and should be instantly recognizable for the viewer. History painting attributes great importance to the interaction between characters, the use of symbolism, and use of color.¹²⁰ Besides having a narrative function, history paintings had an ethical and moral dimension which was meant to educate the viewer about virtue. History painting was large in scale and grandly public, often displayed in churches, the court, and large public buildings. The genre was often particularly associated with absolutist monarchies and regimes.¹²¹ The resemblance between the genre of history painting and the genre of thematic painting and the similitude of Juche Realism to Socialist Realism in North Korean

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38-41.

¹¹⁸ Tupan and de Ceuster, *De Kim Utopie*, 9.

¹¹⁹ Anthony Langdon, “history painting.” In *The Oxford Companion to Western Art* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662037.001.0001/acref-9780198662037-e-1210>.

¹²⁰ Tupan and de Ceuster, *De Kim Utopie*, 33.

¹²¹ David A. Green and Peter Seddon, *History Painting Reassessed: The Representation of History in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 7.

art indicate that, like the personality cults of the leaders of North Korea, North Korean art theory was – at least partly – constructed out of a variety of preceding concepts.

In the next chapter, I will be conducting a visual analysis of the depiction of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in North Korean thematic paintings.

6. Visual Analysis

In the last two chapters, I have examined the personality cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and the official DPRK theory surrounding art. In this chapter, I will be conducting a visual analysis of the depiction of Kim Il Sung and the depiction of Kim Jong Il in North Korean thematic paintings on the basis of the information discussed in the previous chapters. In doing so, I aim to determine how these thematic paintings reflect the personality cults of the two leaders, as well as whether there are any differences and similarities in the way the two leaders are depicted. I will be analyzing paintings of Kim Il Sung, paintings of Kim Jong Il, and paintings of the two leaders together. I have selected fourteen paintings which were published by the North Korean government in commemorative books such as ‘국가미술전람회: 조선민주주의인민공화국창건 60 돌경축,’ ‘당의 품소에 꽃피는 미술축전: 조선로동당창건 65 돌기념 미술화첩,’ ‘조선문학예술년감,’ and ‘조선로동당창건 55 돌경축’. I have based my selection of paintings on the six main themes of thematic painting as named in ‘On Fine Art’ discussed in the previous chapter.

6.1 The Depiction of Kim Il Sung



Fig. 1. – The General and Sergeants at Arms¹²²

¹²² Gyu Hak Kim and Yeong Geol Bae, “The General and Sergeants at Arms,” 1999. Korean painting, In *조선문학예술년*. Pyongyang: 문학예술종합출판사, 1999.

“The General and Sergeants at Arms” by Gyu Hak Kim and Yeong Geol Bae (fig.1) depicts Kim Il Sung and his group of guerrilla fighters in a snowy landscape. Many paintings which illustrate Kim’s guerrilla days seem to portray him and his guerrilla group in a winter environment. In the painting, Kim Il Sung rises above all of the other characters which are depicted, and is surrounded by a white light which draws the attention to him as the main character of the work. The fact that Kim is holding a gun in this painting is significant because the Kim family is regularly referred to as the ‘gun barrel’ (*ch’ongtae*) family, and it is said that a gun has been passed down in the Kim family from generation to generation.¹²³ The gun thus signifies the revolutionary bloodline of the Kims. Behind Kim, one of the soldiers is holding a red flag, a symbol of revolution and Communism.¹²⁴ All of the characters except for Kim Il Sung are in an active position, and several of the soldiers are running in the direction Kim is looking toward while firing their guns. The other soldiers seem to be attempting to protect the leader, with two of them even having their backs turned to the fight. The painting thus propagandizes the idea of sacrificing one’s own life to protect the leader. In the background on the right side of the painting, a large cloud of smoke and fire is visible. This is an indexical sign, signifying an ongoing battle. The painting emphasizes the image of Kim Il Sung as a revolutionary leader.



Fig. 2 – The Great Leader Kim Il Sung Giving the Order to Counterattack with Firearms¹²⁵

In figure 2, Kim Il Sung can be seen standing on top of a mountain in military uniform, with his left hand outstretched and his right one on a paper containing a battle strategy or a map.

¹²³ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 45.

¹²⁴ Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin,” 193-194.

¹²⁵ Seong Min Kim, “The Great Leader Kim Il Sung Giving the Order to Counterattack with Firearms,” 1993. Korean painting, 5500 x 2200, In *인민예술가 김성민 작품집*. Pyongyang: Mansudae Art Studio, 2004, 18.

He is portrayed in an active position, coat billowing and hand outstretched.¹²⁶ There is a group of soldiers behind him, most of whom are following the direction Kim is pointing toward with their gaze. Beneath them, on lower ground, an ongoing battle is visible. This can be derived from the depiction of soldiers and tanks who are in an active combat situation and the smoke rising from the area in which they are situated. The absence of snow and the considerable amount of soldiers Kim has leadership over indicate that the historical context of this painting is the Korean War, or the Fatherland Liberation War as the DPRK refers to it. The painting emphasizes the image of Kim Il Sung as a revolutionary leader and a military genius.



Fig. 3 – In a Village in the Liberated Southern Part of Korea¹²⁷

“In a Village in the Liberated Southern Part of Korea” by Chang Mo Jeong (fig. 3) depicts Kim Il Sung laughing together with Korean citizens, while his soldiers mingle with the other inhabitants of the village in the background. Kim Il Sung is smiling at the townspeople seated next to him while holding a bowl, presumably filled with food offered to him by these people. This is signified by the little girl sitting to the far left, filling a pot with food. The citizens Kim is interacting with are wearing traditional clothing in light colors, putting Kim in stark contrast with his black military uniform. Judging by the shadows Kim Il Sung is casting and the greenery in the painting, the season seems to be spring or summer. The absence of harsh weather circumstances and the abundance of food in this painting signify the end of harsh

¹²⁶ Pisch, “The Personality Cult of Stalin,” 290.

¹²⁷ Chang Mo Jeong, “In a Village in the Liberated Southern Part of Korea,” 1989. Korean painting, 1650 x 970, In *인민예술가 정창모 작품집*. Pyongyang: Mansudae Art Studio, 2004, 8.

living circumstances now that the leader is there to take care of the townspeople. The artist presents Kim Il Sung as the focal point by placing him in the centre of the painting and depicting him as the only one wearing black attire. The title of the painting is significant because it implies that the illustrated scene takes place in the Southern part of Korea. The use of the term ‘liberation’ and the presence of soldiers in the painting indicate that it is set within the timeframe of the Fatherland Liberation War. The townspeople are thus people living in the Southern part of Korea, portrayed as being thankful to Kim Il Sung for liberating them. The painting emphasizes the role of Kim Il Sung as a benevolent leader and emancipator, and depicts the relations between the army and the people.



Fig.4 – A Historical Morning¹²⁸

In “A Historical Morning” by Sam Hyeok Seo (fig. 4), Kim Il Sung is staring into the distance to the right, pen and paper in hand. His posture is decidedly straight and still, and his black clothes starkly contrast the lighter pastel colors in which his surroundings are illustrated. He is surrounded by beautiful nature and standing in front of a lake or a pond. Unlike the other paintings I have analyzed, there are no characters other than the leader. The title of the piece, “A Historical Morning,” indicates that what Kim is theorizing about in this painting is an important event in the history of North Korea. It is a safe assumption that the painting depicts Kim Il Sung formulating the idea of Juche theory. The painting emphasizes Kim’s role as the Party’s only approved ideologue and theorist.

¹²⁸ Sam Hyeok Seo, “A Historical Morning,” 2001. Korean painting, In *조선로동당창건55 돌경축*. Pyongyang: 문학예술출판사, 2001.



Fig. 5 – Look at the Snow in Mangyeongdae¹²⁹

In figure 5, Kim Il Sung is portrayed surrounded by children, who are either holding onto the leader or running toward him with open arms. It is snowing, and the children are looking toward Kim to shelter them from the snow. The depiction of snowfall evokes the recurring theme of portraying Kim Il Sung as a leader and protector in harsh natural conditions. Kim is presented as the focal point of the painting by towering over the other characters and being the centre of the circle the other characters are forming; not only with their bodies but also with the direction of their gaze. Two of the children are offering flowers to Kim Il Sung. Flowers are oftentimes used as a symbol for celebration and abundance.¹³⁰ The color red is a prominent factor in this painting, recurring in the scarves worn by the children and Kim Il Sung, the pants the children are wearing, and the hat of the military official in the far right of the painting. As previously stated, the color red is regularly utilized as a symbol for Communism. Behind the crowd of children in this painting stands a statue of a younger, more rigid Kim Il Sung. In this manner, several images of Kim Il Sung are depicted at once: the image of the fatherly leader by the portrayal of Kim Il Sung himself, and the image of the institutional founder represented by the statue.

¹²⁹ Seong Min Kim, "Look at the Snow in Mangyeongdae," 1997. Korean painting, 3600 x 2000, In *인민예술가 김성민 작품집*. Pyongyang: Mansudae Art Studio, 2004, 39.

¹³⁰ Pisch, "The Personality Cult of Stalin," 213.



Figure 6 – The Great Sun of the Citizens of the World¹³¹

Figure 6 depicts Kim Il Sung among a mass of Caucasian foreigners. Behind Kim is a progression of cars, giving the impression that he is conducting a state visit to another country. The artist has established Kim as the clear focal point of the painting by portraying him as the only person wearing black, whereas the rest of the characters are wearing light-colored clothing. Further emphasis is placed on the leader by situating the massive crowd of foreigners around Kim in a large circle, as well as making him the centre of their gaze. Moreover, the confetti falling from the sky is especially bright-colored above the head of Kim Il Sung. Two people in traditional clothing are offering a gift to Kim Il Sung, emphasizing his international popularity. The multi-generational crowd is cheering for him, and several people are carrying flowers, North Korean flags and posters of the leader. This painting emphasizes Kim's image as an internationally recognized theorist and emancipator.

¹³¹ Dong Hwan Kim, "The Great Sun of the Citizens of the World," 1999. Korean painting, In *조선문학예술년*. Pyongyang: 문학예술종합출판사, 1999.

6.2 The Depiction of the Two Leaders Together



Fig. 7 - The Celebration of February Before the Nation's Liberation¹³²

Figure 7 depicts Kim Il Sung, his wife Kim Jong Suk and his son Kim Jong Il among Kim Il Sung's guerrilla group of fighters. The three Kims are the main characters of the painting, which is emphasized in several ways. Firstly, they are situated in the middle of the painting, with the other characters positioned around them in a half circle. Secondly, the Kims are differentiated from the other characters by the Kimilsungia flowers pinned to the jackets of the parents and the flower garland around Kim Jong Il's neck. Thirdly, their uniforms are a lighter color of brown compared to the ones surrounding them. All three of the Kims are gazing straight forward at the viewer while smiling. Interestingly, several of the guerrilla fighters are looking forward as well, and the ones who do not are all in an active position. The painting is composed in such a way that it resembles a deliberately taken group picture. In the background, there is a red flag, symbolizing revolution and Communism. Even further in the background to the right, a cabin is visible. In combination with the snow and the presence of Kim Jong Il, the composition of the painting suggests that the guerrilla group is located on Mt. Paektu, where they were based in the last few years of the Japanese occupation according to North Korean propaganda. The title of the work, "The Celebration of February Before the Nation's Liberation," further indicates that the characters are situated on Mt. Paektu. The 'celebration of February' refers to the birth of Kim Jong Il on February 16, 1942, which allegedly took place on Mt. Paektu. This painting thus serves to legitimize the biographies of

¹³² Seong Min Kim, "The Celebration of February Before the Nation's Liberation," 1992. Korean painting, 2910 x 2200, In *인민예술가 김성민 작품집*. Pyongyang: Mansudae Art Studio, 2004, 12-13.

the two leaders as they are written by the North Korean propagandists. Furthermore, the painting establishes Kim Il Sung and his wife as revolutionary leaders, as well as caring parents for Kim Jong Il.



Fig. 8 – We Are the Happiest Children in the World¹³³

Figure 8 portrays both leaders among a group of children. Kim Il Sung is sitting down on a bench in a black suit with his arms around two children, whereas Kim Jong Il is standing up in his worker's uniform while carrying a girl. Both of them are smiling while looking outward at the viewer. The children are all facing towards the leaders while smiling. Some of the children are wearing traditional clothing, but more interestingly, many of them are wearing uniforms from different occupations. One boy is dressed like a military officer, another as a sailor, and yet another as a basketball player. The kids are all wearing clothes in pristine condition, there are balloons in the background, and they are holding things such as a bike, a ball, a gun and a net. The implications are that the leaders have gifted these to them and ensure that the children are properly cared for. A father and mother can be spotted in the background on the left side, but they are fading into the background. This is highly symbolic for the real parents of a child fading into the background and the leader taking over the parental role for North Korean children. The background is also white and gray, whereas the place where the leaders and the children are sitting are an explosion of color, the grass is green and there are Kimilsungia's blooming in the foreground. This is a visual sign of life being better when

¹³³ Seong Min Kim, "We Are the Happiest Children in the World," 1995. Korean painting, 3000 x 2000, In *인민예술가 김성민 작품집*. Pyongyang: Mansudae Art Studio, 2004, 26.

together with the leader. The title further emphasizes that these children are the happiest children in the world under the fatherly leadership of Kim Il Sung and his successor Kim Jong Il.



Fig. 9 – The Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung and the Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong Il with Participants of the National Heroism Contest¹³⁴

Figure 9 illustrates both of the leaders in a celebratory scene for the National Heroism Competition (전국영웅대회) in front of the Mansudae Assembly Hall. The flowers in the front on the right side of the painting signify celebration. Although they are surrounded by masses of people, the two leaders still stand out because of their all black and all white attire. Moreover, the two leaders are taller and take up more space than the other characters. Many of the characters surrounding the leaders have a plethora of military medals on their uniforms, indicating that they are the heroes being celebrated, together with the leaders. Kim Il Sung is being held onto by two military officers, signifying either his role as a parental figure or the fact that he is becoming older and is in need of support. Kim Jong Il is standing apart from the rest of the characters and takes an active position, raising his right hand in greeting. This painting indicates that Kim Il Sung is getting older, and therefore the active younger Kim Jong Il is on the way to taking over leadership. However, in this painting, Kim Il Sung is still the one looking forward, whereas Kim Jong Il looks to him for guidance. The other people, in

¹³⁴ Seong Min Kim, "The Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung and the Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong Il with Participants of the National Heroism Contest," 1989. Korean painting, 8000 x 4000, In *인민예술가 김성민 작품집*. Pyongyang: Mansudae Art Studio, 2004, 29.

turn, are looking at Kim Jong Il. This indicates that although the people follow Kim Jong Il, he is a pupil of his father and will follow his father's manner of political leadership. The related people illustrated throughout the painting signify that North Korea is a genuine socialist homeland for the people.

6.3 The Depiction of Kim Jong Il



Fig. 10 - The Great Commander Comrade Who Has Come to Visit the Female Soldiers of the Northern Region¹³⁵

In figure 10, Kim Jong Il is portrayed while surrounded by female soldiers. His body is facing to the right, as is his smiling face. He is wearing his trademark white coat and army uniform. He is holding the hand of one of the soldiers with his left hand. The female soldiers are surrounding the leader in a circle, and everyone is looking up at him reverently. The female soldiers standing next to him are standing still and touching him, whereas the rest of the soldiers are in motion, trying to get closer to the leader. All of them are smiling. Kim is set apart from the other characters in the painting by the color of his clothing, the direction of his gaze and his height and width. The artist clearly displays Kim as the focal point of the painting by setting him apart from the rest of the characters in this manner, and by placing him in the middle of the painting. As seems to be the case more often in North Korean paintings depicting military scenarios, it is snowing. In the background to the right, military turrets are visible. The painting emphasizes Kim Jong Il's image as both a fatherly and a

¹³⁵ Yeong Woo Oh, "The Great Commander Comrade Who Has Come to Visit the Female Soldiers of the Northern Region," 2001. Oil painting, In *조선로동당창건 55 동경축*. Pyongyang: 문화예술출판사, 2001.

military leader by illustrating his interaction with female soldiers with military equipment surrounding them.



Fig. 11 - Always Together With the People of Daehongdan¹³⁶

Figure 11 depicts Kim Jong Il surrounded by farmers. The title of the work indicates that this scenario takes place in the county of Daehongdan, which is famous for its potatoes. He is wearing his usual white coat and brown military uniform. He is set apart from the characters surrounding him by the use of more vivid colors in portraying his uniform and coat. In the background, agricultural fields are visible, as well as tractors and other agricultural equipment. One man is walking toward the group sitting in the front, carrying a basket full of potatoes. He is smiling while looking at the leader. The other characters are sitting around Kim Jong Il in a circle, and are either looking at him or at the food he provides them with. All of them are smiling. Kim Jong Il himself is also smiling at the character to whom he is handing a baked potato. The other characters can be recognized as farmers by their agricultural surroundings and their working attire. In front of the group, there is a fire going in which they are baking the potatoes. The man in front in the far right is taking care of the fire and cooking the potatoes using a stick. Next to him is yet another basket overflowing with potatoes. This painting is clearly meant to signify that under the leadership of the benevolent leader, the North Korean people are thriving and will have plentiful harvests. The image of Kim Jong Il giving a potato to one of the workers indicates that North Korean people should be thankful to the Dear Leader because he is the one providing for them.

¹³⁶ Seong Min Kim, "Always Together With the People of Daehongdan," 2009. Korean painting, in *조선민주주의인민공화국창건 60 돌경축*. Pyongyang: 문화예술출판사, 2009.



Fig. 12 - The Fatherly General Who Has Come to Visit the School in Person¹³⁷

In figure 12, Kim Jong Il is portrayed in his usual attire in a school classroom together with male and female children and a female teacher. He is holding a textbook in his left hand, to which he is pointing with his right hand. He is looking towards a boy on the left, who has three red stars and two red stripes on the left sleeve his uniform whereas the other kids do not. This seems to signify that the boy is the class president. The boy is standing up and making eye contact with Kim Jong Il. The painting depicts a revolutionary youth being inspired by Kim Jong Il, and Kim seeing his potential and teaching these children in an instance of on-the-spot guidance. The leader is emphasized in the painting by being the only one wearing white, being taller than the other characters, being the centre of everyone's gaze, and by the use of light to emphasize his face. There is a calendar with the three most important symbols of North Korean communism on it on the left wall: the sickle, the hammer, and the calligraphy brush. This painting shows not only Kim's role as a fatherly leader, but also as a theorist and teacher. The enthusiastic reaction of the school teacher behind him emphasizes that he is not just the father of North Korean children, but of all the North Korean people.

¹³⁷ Jae Sik Choi, "The Fatherly General Who Has Come to Visit the School in Person," 2005. Watercolor painting, In *조선문학예술년*. Pyongyang: 문학예술출판사, 2005.



Fig. 13 - Visiting the Laboring Class of Kim Iron at the Metallurgy Base¹³⁸

In figure 13, Kim Jong Il is illustrated giving on-the-spot guidance to laborers in a factory specialized in metallurgy. He is positioned in the middle of the painting, and is the only character wearing white. The way the light of the painting is positioned encompasses the leader with a bright light. He is holding out his left hand, explaining something to the workers surrounding him. They can be identified as factory laborers by their helmets and attire. The attire they wear is similar to that of Kim himself, who is almost always depicted wearing a simple brown uniform. Every worker except for one in the back is looking at the leader. The characters are surrounded by vats of hot metal, signified by the indexical signs of fire and smoke coming out of the vats. Furthermore, steam is depicted in both in the foreground and the background of the painting. In this manner, the painting provides a lively image of a factory which is humid and works with hot metals, as the title of the painting has already indicated. In the background on the right side of the painting, several laborers can be seen cheering for the arrival of Kim Jong Il. This painting depicts Kim as a teacher of the people, and shows him giving on-the-spot guidance. The implicit meaning of him visiting a metal factory is that the factory is creating metal to make weapons for the progression of Military First politics.

¹³⁸ Sung Il Hong, Yeong Min Kang and Byeong Jin Jeon, "Visiting the Laboring Class of Kim Iron at the Metallurgy Base," 2011. Oil painting, In *조선로동당창건 65 돌기념 미술화첩*. Pyongyang: 문학예술출판사, 2011.



Fig. 14 - Observing Gunfire Exercises¹³⁹

Figure 14 portrays Kim Jong Il overlooking the firing of tens of missiles from higher ground, accompanied by several military officers. The firing of missiles is signified by the flying rectangular objects followed by red flares in the background, as well as the smoke rising up into the air above the objects. Kim is looking to the left, the direction the missiles are going toward. He is not smiling and assumes a strong, masculine pose, both hands balled into fists. The officers behind him are looking toward the same direction as the leader. There are binoculars lying in front of Kim Jong Il, and one of the officers is standing behind a similar device. To the far right, there is a laptop, likely the laptop which is commanding the missiles to be fired, signifying that these missiles are under the control of Kim Jong Il. The soldier furthest to the right is holding a red garment, signifying communism. This painting depicts Kim Jong Il as a masculine and charismatic military leader. This image is in contrast with the other paintings analyzed in this thesis, which all tend to show the parental side of Kim, even when depicting him together with the military.

¹³⁹ Gwang Hyeok Ju, "Observing Gunfire Exercises," 2011. Oil painting, In *조선로동당창건 65 돌기념 미술화첩*. Pyongyang: 문학예술출판사, 2011.

7. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have conducted a comparative analysis of the depiction of Kim Il Sung and the depiction of Kim Jong Il in North Korean thematic paintings. In doing so, I have examined the personality cults of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as well as North Korean art theory, and concluded with a visual analysis of fourteen thematic paintings depicting Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in order to determine how these paintings reflect the personality cults of the two leaders.

First and foremost, a recurring aspect of the paintings is that the leader is always the focal point of the work, even if he is not necessarily in the structural centre of the painting itself. This is dictated as a rule for depicting the leader in 'On Fine Art' by Kim Jong Il, and indicates the supreme importance of the leader above anything else in North Korean society. Another noticeable trait of thematic paintings is that the paintings tend to present the depicted situation as if it is a historical event which has truly happened. This is especially the case for those paintings which depict scenes from the biographies of the leaders, such as Kim Il Sung's guerrilla days and the birthplace of Kim Jong Il. The events illustrated in thematic paintings are supposed to be conceived by the North Korean people as real historical events. Moreover, the majority of the paintings analyzed in the last chapter portray not one, but several images of the personality cult of the leader in a single painting. The image of the fatherly leader can be combined with that of the military leader as in Figure 10, or a leader can be depicted as both fatherly and as an institutional founder as in Figure 5. There are many facets of the personality cult of the North Korean leaders, and therefore there are many different aspects of the cult to portray in one painting. Oftentimes, the second image in the painting is that of the fatherly leader. Interestingly, the two leaders are always depicted as benevolent and smiling when interacting with the Korean people, and are only portrayed in a more serious manner when dealing with military situations which involve foreign threats. In this way, thematic paintings reinforce the idea of the indigenous Korean people against the 'Other', the enemy. Additionally, thematic paintings utilize a plethora of symbols such as red flags, Kimilsungia and Kimjongilia to refer to the leader and the Party indirectly as well.

There are some differences in the depiction of Kim Il Sung and the depiction of Kim Jong Il in thematic paintings. Kim Jong Il is portrayed in the same simple brown uniform and white coat in every painting, whereas Kim Il Sung is portrayed in several different ensembles such as suits in a variety of colors and his military uniform. Furthermore, Kim Jong Il is depicted in an active stance more often than Kim Il Sung, who is usually portrayed in a more

static position. However, the themes of the situations in which the two leaders are portrayed display many similarities. Although Kim Il Sung might be depicted with his guerrilla fighters whereas Kim Jong Il is portrayed while firing missiles, the military theme in itself remains the same. Since Kim Jong Il's main image is that of the successor to the Great Leader, many of the themes in thematic painting which were utilized to portray Kim Il Sung have been retained in the portrayal of Kim Jong Il.

Because of the limited word count of 15,000 words, this thesis was only able to focus on the direct depiction of the leaders in fourteen thematic paintings. In order to grasp a more wholesome understanding of the depiction of the personality cult of the leader in thematic paintings, more research with a bigger scope of analysis is necessary. Additionally, paintings that do not directly depict the leaders also contain many references to the leaders and the Party and therefore would be very interesting to include in a more extensive analysis of North Korean paintings in the future.

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